

Into His Marvellous Light.

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(1 Peter 2:9.)

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Abstract.

Light allows revelation while concealing its source; it allows articulation while it is non-articulate. It is light that allows us to stand on the edge, that border between knowing and unknowing. It was the first great *kenotic* act, deconstructing darkness and it is this sublime aspect of light that takes us beyond the limits of our own imaginations, and in that process raises us to unexpected insight and perception. This thesis is a discourse on the sublimity of light that has provided a catalyst for fresh reflection beyond that which is actually presented whereby the sublime can be understood as an experience rather than merely an object or sense of perception.

While light and darkness can stand symbolically for many realities theologically light became a symbol of divine presence and salvation in ancient Judaism where it was seen as God's glory, was revealed in columns of fire and burning bushes, and was envisioned as a sign of the perfection of the kingdom; 'arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you' (Isa. 60:1). Similarly at the start of the Christian era light is associated with the Eucharist and although Paul celebrates in Troas at midnight it is still noted that 'there were many lights in the upper chamber where we were gathered' (Acts 20:8). The expression of this has gone far beyond the work of theologians and necessitated an interdisciplinary approach to this study linking the work of writers, poets and artists, particularly painters.

All Art is essentially about representing the unrepresentable. Beyond the mimetic this is more easily recognised and accepted and it is the art of abstraction that has accelerated the drive towards the sublime where "the sublime can be understood as first and foremost the result of a failed attempt of the imagination to comprehend an absolute of magnitude or power."¹ It is along these lines that Theology and Art can be seen to run parallel.

¹Trottein. S. 'Lyotard: Before and After the Sublime.' in Lyotard. (Ed) Silverman. H. Routledge, London. 2002. P.197.

Art has resisted the repeated announcements of its death or demise. This is because Art has always moved within itself and has never completely located itself in any movement or mere style whereas Theology has often become bogged down in a floe of words that formed vast sheets, or melted away. Art has always been greater than historical attempts at impossible depictions of some ethical idea. Art is what is left in the absence of any idea; and it is the presence of absence that remains a central concern of theology.

An interdisciplinary approach raises the question of the paradox of artistic articulation towards silence; that the words and images, as they become more articulate, come closer to finality, that they are a prelude to the silence of the sublime. This study is an approach to the articulation of light; the threshold of the sublime.

Chapter 1 – Light is Intrusion: examines the initial *kenotic* act as intrusive and goes on to consider light as subversive, as an act of colonisation and as the creation of a narrative.

Chapter 2 – Light is Transfiguration: examines the mystery and glory of light, and looks at the apocalyptic aspect.

Chapter 3 – Light is Infinity: examines how this aspect has been rendered, its sources and effects.

Chapter 4 – Light is Darkness: considers with how we perceive the unperceivable, and how we deal with darkness.

Chapter 5 – Light is Apocalypse: examines the facility of light to reveal yet remain hidden and how this has been expressed.

Chapter 6 – Light is Shadow: an inspection of the depth of light, and the notion of shadow as text.

The Conclusion gathers these areas and illustrates how Modern Art has forced issues like formlessness and the sublime into the forefront of awareness.

It is only through an interdisciplinary approach to this area that any clarity may be achieved. The nature of the differing languages of art and theology have facilitated the appreciation of *kenosis* as comparable to the Post-modern notion

of deconstruction, and it will be shown that where language fails the Spiritual and Art are the areas that fill the void. Art has always been beyond its time, forcing us to the threshold. The sublime was never about what we see or the fact that we see it, but about how we see it and it has been the task of the artist, especially the painter, to articulate the language of light. Light like language enables us to establish ourselves and the sublime light takes us beyond, to the threshold of definitions. The blinding light is shunned by most and endured, briefly, by a few who at that point have crossed the threshold where light becomes a reality, a full presence in their lives.

The light that has become a domesticated commodity is not the sublime light and the deconstruction of “the post-modern is the precipitation of suspicion, the acceleration of questioning”² provoked by the onslaught of abstraction. Post-modernism is not a chronological event after the decline of Modernism but a constant state of uncertainty and questioning.

The sublime promotes and sustains a tough intellectual argument, and there is a profound tradition behind the development and representation of the sublime. The blinding light exists at the frontiers of human endurance where being may be to be more true but is also the place of encounters with the totally other. It is not a place of comfort or safety. This existence on the margins of the known and secure is a central aspect of the life of Christ, is echoed in the lives of the Desert Fathers, and found in the work of the artists discussed where examining the realities of the light around them has led to a new language that has striven to depict representations of the unrepresentable. They have determined how we must look more, talk less, and eventually, may perceive. This process endorses contemplation whereby we may travel beyond perception to an essence of transcendence and unity.

²Trottein. P. 197.

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“The nature of light is only describable by enumerating its properties and founding them on the simplest possible principles.”³

Light, the first act of creation, is the first tangible truth yet with the creation of the luminaries is lost the capacity of language to express it. The same tension between a tangible truth and its disintegration can be seen in Biblical commentaries when dealing with the *Logos*. “The Word has the power to make God present”⁴ but the true light, like the name of God, is impossible to know, indeed is prohibited. It is the work of artists, primarily painters, which has attempted to approach a description of light; who have offered to enunciate it and step beyond the conventions of history and art to endeavour to construct a dialogue outwith those conventions that allow reason and perception. The paintings discussed in this interdisciplinary examination, a process developed from my degree studies in Fine Art and in Theology, deconstruct “the usual reading of the world, that network of figures which keeps the Presence hidden”⁵ and have advanced our understanding of the mystery of light. If God may be sensed as an eternal 'now' - “the excellency of an ever-present eternity”⁶ then the initial light of creation; a *kenotic* outpouring of light into life, into creation, maintains that eternal, infinite presence also. Light is the first created, incarnational gift of grace – ‘God is light and in him is no darkness at all’

³Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol. 14. P. 57.

⁴Mathews. T. in his introduction to *On the Motion and Immobility of Douve* by Bonnefoy. Y. Trans. By Kinnell. G. Bloodaxe, Newcastle upon Tyne. 1992. P. 26.

⁵Bonnefoy. Y. *In the Shadows Light*. Trans. Naughton. J. University of Chicago. 199. P. 163.

⁶St. Augustine. *Confessions*. Book XI, Chpt. XIII. 16.

(1 Jn.1:15). Time is no co-eternal since God does not age and is that ever present eternity. There is past time and past light but that light is illuminary and not of the initial creation. That divine light is of the ever present eternity; constantly 'He uncovers the deeps out of darkness and brings deep darkness to light' (Job 12:22). Any reference to relevant brightness is located in the notion of daylight or moonlight as what we measure is not time but the spaces of time so what we know of light is not its brightness but the nature of its days and seasons. The divine light cannot be likened to the sun which may be clouded or the moon which waxes and wanes. Light, like time, is proportioned but the divine light is constant, undiminished and non-reliant on darkness for comparison.

Introduction.

This study is an aspect of theological reflection on how we have sought to deal with the categories of light and dark in art, their metaphors and rhetorical uses. Light exists as a recognised yet unfixed point situated outside time and space yet contributing and inherent in both. It is external to human society yet inherent in humanity's ability to make rational decisions; reason is largely dependent on light.

Our reliance on symbols, icons, rituals and sacraments at key moments in social, ceremonial and religious occasions manifests a primal need to express our most potent desires or aspirations through familiar objects and gestures. These metaphorical acts stimulate our senses and through them our minds, imaginations and emotions. This in turn can activate our wills and stir us into action. In concentrating on light it would appear to have been the particular skills and insights of artists that have allowed the Church and society to explore what light is beyond its illuminative capacity. “Visual artists express thoughts, and often very complex thoughts, by sensuous means so compelling that even the illiterate can grasp their meaning.”⁷

Seeing can be seen as a predatory sense; we tend to look at what interests us, at what pertains to us and maintains our sense of freedom. The initial light of God, somehow deeper, more refined from having been in contact with the dark element, a purer light, materialised behind the light of day creates space and is capable of burning out the conventions of geometry which can imprison us. The initial light created was of God, was God, was divine, and whether it was uniquely formed to combat chaos or not “the real concern is the revelation of the

⁷Danto. A. Unnatural Wonders. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York. 2005. P. 47.

absolute omnipotence of God”⁸ and the need to re-examine the idea of that original light of creation. This is where theology, the nature of its methodologies and processes, and an examination of the creative process in painting may be explored in overlapping terms.

The illumination of theology is slow acting; it irradiates the shadows, its illuminance gathers at the edges, where the light tides turn and shadows collect. Yves Bonnefoy, a French poet and Professor of Comparative Studies at the College de France, Paris, has examined the 'presence' of light and how humanity attempts to express it, and reveals a “concern with what separates words from some essential truth hidden in objects.”⁹ The shadow's flux area of a surface is that situation that allows the connection of thoughts and interpretations, comments and ideas, and creates a space, a potentially sacred space. Like the artists discussed Bonnefoy's poetry is based on what we now know of what we attempt to imagine. While this understanding exists only at the frontier of our interplay with thought and knowledge the words produced offer us “a kind of momentary eternity.”¹⁰ Both painting and theology are capable of creating sacred space through their understanding and utilisation of light, not only within the text or weave of the canvas. The space that they create – that gap between the viewer and the viewed/ the reader and the read, is the area where our darkness is lightened and the possible location for reflective theology to occur.

This study is not a process of dialectics. It cannot be a disputation or debate intended to resolve differences nor can it be a course for reconciliation of contradiction, either of theological beliefs or art historical methods. Rather it must be a dialogical exchange of views and stances; a conversation related to the transfer of opinions on particular aspects of Art and Theology. There is a perceived need for more dialogue between Art and Theology¹¹ but the obvious gap between the two continues to exist. While personal interest and co-operation

⁸Eichrodt. W. *Theology of the Old Testament. Vol. 2.* SCM, London. 1967. P. 106.

⁹Bonnefoy. Y. *On the Motion and Immobility of Douve.* Trans. Kinnell. G. Bloodaxe, Newcastle upon Tyne. 1992. P. 13.

¹⁰Bonnefoy. P. 19.

¹¹See *Reluctant Partners*, Heller. E. (Ed) The Gallery at the American Bible Society, New York. 2004.

activates debate relatively little interaction has taken place. Exhibitions of Religious Art have grown, a serious interest in religious artefacts is apparent¹², and exhibitions dedicated to various religious traditions have developed in the last ten years. This however is skirting around the edge of the problem. Where the Church has seen art and artists as part of their sphere of influence in the past, and some would see Modernism as the cause of the breakdown and a return to Christianity as the cure, this no longer applies. Even within the historical arrangements of patronage, artists evolving the traditions of European art developed style and technique in personal and creative ways that allowed personalised statements of religious themes that were acceptable to the Church, which, in acknowledging the talent around them, was acutely aware of the power of the images that might be produced and exercised its patronage accordingly.

Art and all sorts of subjects can be linked together to form fields of study; 'art and sociology', 'art and gender', but the study of art and religion is too broad, too differentiated by language and geography, national history and religious division to be an effective area of approach. It is within the confines of Painting and Theology that some definitive aspects may be pinpointed. The transfer between these two subjects is not a pure discourse, rather it may be compared to the operation of colour where light illuminates substance and also affects surface, altering tone and hue value.

Colour is an attribute of things that results from the light they reflect, and chromatic colours result from the interaction between hues. Hues are the ideal; the pure red inside the can or tube, the yellowest yellow locked away in darkness. On exposure to light, and other chromatic colours, they interact with each other, affect the tonal scale, subtly change the chromatic quality. For painters that area of interaction between hues is where colour takes place on the palette and canvas. "The world....is the Devil's motley, colourful instead of pure,"¹³ divinely created but treated, utilised and neglected by man. It is light that lifts edges into being. Light is the drapery that covers the still life of creation; it is a fabric

¹²See the newly contemporised Art & Christianity Enquiry quarterly.

¹³Udipke. J. Seek My Face. Penguin, London. 2002. P. 5.

without name that conceals its secrets. Light works as an integral aspect of painting and as a theological idea and experience. Where Painting and Theology interact there is created a key area, not of the representation of space but of a space for representation. Within this arena the task of theology can be questioned and renewed, since the language of both disciplines at this point are both unspoken and may well be defeated by their minimalism to “encourage an act of contemplation in which we move even beyond seeing to an inner experience of transcendence and unity.”¹⁴ In and by Light we have a key area where Art, especially Painting, and Theology interact, as with the creation of light the quality of silence changed and it is in those silent moments in individual texts or paintings that we may see the light in the perception of metaphor beyond metaphor.

In effect this study examines two things at once. Theologically it explores the notion of light and *Logos* as being coterminous, as having a shared margin, a common border that makes them coexistent and coextensive. The divine presence participating in a theological event of light and thereafter contiguous with it. The creation of light/life is seen as the first great *kenotic* act of the Godhead. A divine outpouring of light and love initiating structure and life, reason and being. Light then is an incarnational event that has bordered existence. Only perhaps with the Desert Fathers of the 4th Century CE does this coterminous situation appear to have been realised and celebrated. The movement of people wishing to adopt “the early Christian ideal of standing where Christ stands”¹⁵ was not solely concerned with the ideals of celibacy, fasting, solitude, silence, vigil, prayer and poverty. The men and women who moved out of the urban centres into the deserts of Syria, Palestine and, especially, Egypt sought the light of Christ in which the presence of God was revealed through their new life of asceticism. They sought a oneness with creation and celebrated the light of Christ as 'in him was life, and the life was the

¹⁴Jasper. D. 'Light in the Darkness of the Heart; Art and the Spiritual.' in Contemplations on the Spiritual. Mitchell. K. (Ed) Glasgow School of Art. 2004. P. 41.

¹⁵Ward. B. The Desert Fathers. Penguin, London. 2003. P. IX.

light of men' (Jn.1:4). The incarnational event of light gave rise to this process of engagement with Scripture that would lead the desert ascetics to an enactment of it whereby these desert hermits would strive to become an embodiment of Scripture.

Parallel to this artists, in their own way, produced work that was an analogy to the discussion of light. Art, from time to time, participated in the divine being of light, utilising the visual nature of the process to provoke and demand a response as it takes us from seeing, to viewing, to voyeurism; what we see, what we think we see, and how we react to what we see. This follows quite closely the parabolic method of teaching adopted by Christ where the light/*logos* within us is brought forth to the moment of judgement. In different ways, using different processes and materials, and at different times some artists have sought to celebrate the incarnational event of light, participating in the divine being of light in ways that have perhaps been forgotten or missed.

Light is a power outwith ourselves, beyond our separate realities yet defining our being and interacting with us, between us and in us. It is the initial event of human experience; "it is the experience of exchange with otherness."¹⁶

¹⁶Greene. R. Searching for Presence. Rodopi, Amsterdam. 2004. P. 87.

Chapter One.

The Hebrew Bible.

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
The earth was without form and void, and darkness was
on the face of the deep;
and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.
And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.
And God saw that the light was good; and God separated
the light from the darkness.
God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.'
Genesis 1:1-5. (RSV)

This is a text that has not appeared by chance. This is not a reflection of the chaos of creation or of the formless void that pre-dates it, but a narrative "that has been carefully enriched over centuries by very slow growth."¹⁷ This text does not present itself as allusion or symbolism, nor does it present the poetics of the Psalms. These opening verses reveal what was held, at that time, to be the state of the primeval conditions of the cosmos and also act as a declaration of faith. The creation and ordering of chaos by a god were two things celebrated by many Near Eastern traditions.

The text deals with aspects of formation that lie outwith the scope of human imagination. The first instance of this is that God did, of his own volition, creatively establish heaven and earth and thereby commenced all aspects of subsequent existence.

¹⁷ Von Rad. G. Genesis. SCM, London. 1963. P. 45.

The second verse deals with the notion of Chaos; the dark, formless void of the abyss of nothingness; a watery chaos locked in darkness where the Spirit of God moved, hovered, or possibly oscillated, above the water. The Tehom (sea of chaos) relates to the newly created, but unconstructed earth located within the cosmic abyss which will emerge from the chthonic by the creation of light, whereas heaven seems to have been completed at a word and needs no further refinement.

The divine storm (Dan. 7:2) that agitates the primeval sea is then a result of the process of creation or of the hovering of the Spirit (Deut. 32:11) above the face of the deep. The movement, stirring of the Spirit, or storm of God, refers then to the formation of chaos and not to the creation of what follows. This hovering or brooding, Keller's 'oscillation'¹⁸ has its origins in religions from neighbouring mythologies. The Tehomic idea is directly related to the Babylonian Tiamat – the primeval dragon of chaos and the animal characterisation feeds in turn leviathan imagery.

“The terms used in verse 2 are freed from every mythological context”¹⁹ as they were aspects of priestly learning of prime importance at annual cult festivals serving as catchwords which united a diverse intellectual content.

The mythology appears alongside the poetics in Ps.104:5-9 and in Ps. 89:9-14 where creation is related to strength and hence to ‘righteousness and justice’. The mingling of mythologies is seen clearly in Ps. 74:12-17 where God is salvation from the monsters of chaos while Isa. 51:9-10 resonates with Ps.89 in consolidation of the notion of control of the monsters and waters of chaos. What these readings allow is the intermediate state of chaos situated between nothingness and creation; a chaos that is the springboard of a theological declaration of intent, not a retreat, or backward step from the concise boldness of the first verse.

The language of the second verse refers not only to a reality that may have existed in a pre-primordial period but also to the chance that it always exists

¹⁸Keller. C. Face of the Deep. Routledge, London. 2003. P. 202.

¹⁹ Von Rad. P. 48.

behind the curtain of creation. The formless abyss is always there; the chaos of apocalypse lurks as a threat to everything in creation.

Faith is refined by an image of negation. God's creation is supported eternally and the cosmos requires this support. Woe betide the loss of faith. The ordering and formation of creation out of chaos allows faith to determine itself between the poles of creation and chaos. One could consider Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*²⁰ almost as an illustration of this aspect where the dynamism of the blue uprights separate yet support a paint structure that, at the outset, may seem chaotic.

The confident continuance of God's creative activity then restarts in the third verse with the creation of Light; its positive acceptance and its separation from darkness, which "was on the face of the deep." "Light is the first work, because it is the indispensable condition of all order, all directness, all life and all further progress."²¹ God creates light on the first day of creation, apparently the light of day, but this is not sunlight – 'the greater light to rule the day' – that appears on day four of the creation cycle. This is the word made light, a light that must be 'separated *from* the darkness'. This is not a tonal development; there is no suggestion of shadow, or of a greyness that must be segregated into component parts.

"Without Light there is no creation; only light reveals the contours of the creature blurred in darkness."²² The creation of day and night as lit periods of time occurs later (verses 14 & 15). This is the light that calms the world flooded by chaos; this is the home of light (Job 38:19-20) that puts darkness to one side and takes over a new territory. In the poetics of the Psalms light has an aspect of creatureliness (Ps.104: 1-6). Both the deep and light have the capacity to clothe like a garment but it is light that can induce the quality of majesty and honour. While light is external and created, it is 'good'; a prime example of creation, a preferred option, a glory (Ps.104: 31) that will endure forever. It is light that makes plain the marvellous purpose and order of creation.

²⁰Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles Number 11*. 1952. 82"x 15'11". National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

²¹Driver. S. *The Book of Genesis*. Methuen, London. 1909. P. 5.

²² Von Rad. P. 49.

Light is separated from darkness; an element creatively quite unlike light. The darkness of chaos is eliminated and only survives as a limited phenomenon as night. This restricted access of chaos into creation allows a period of formlessness to emerge in a partial way whereby humanity can be made aware of it and the fact that the created order is never incomplete or imperfect is revealed in an echo of God's first creation being repeated as light floods the dawn each morning.

The naming of light, and all subsequent creations, was seen in ancient near eastern societies as the exercise of a sovereign right (2Kgs 23:34 cf 24:17). Lordship over creation and creature is thus graphically claimed by God in a day to day basis that does not mention night or darkness and gives licence to the notion of the darkness of day or the morning darkness of Amos 4:13.

On considering the account of creation in Genesis 1 certain questions arise as to the nature of the void, of blackness, of the deep. Depth is dimension and suggests area and area presupposes form. We cannot deal with a single dimensional entity and depth, even within the notion of chaos, cannot be only two-dimensional. Depth also connotes pressure change and so earth, even as a formless void, suggests a notional element of structure, and changes suggest a differentiated chaos, in fact a *Chaosmos* whose differences are expanded and enhanced in the cosmos.

In Genesis there is also an ending, of chaos - "Yahweh's opposition to all the haphazard tyranny of the powers of chaos is here made utterly plain."²³ A consequence of genesis is the creation of light. God creates light, approves of it, sets the darkness apart from it and calls it day. That light cannot be an eternal light, not a light which is the eternal genesis of the Godhead but rather a light which is the beginning of light, a beginning of being, of actuality. Later, on Day 4, there is created the sun, moon, and stars; the creation of light producing bodies, that will govern day and night, and dictate the length of days, seasons and years.

²³Eichrodt. W. Theology of the Old Testament. Vol. 2. SCM, London. 1967. P.110.

All translations of the Hebrew “presuppose the existence of chaotic pre-existent matter before the work of creation began.”²⁴The first word translates literally as “in beginning” and possesses no definite article. It may be therefore construed as a construct and the clause may be read as “in the beginning of God's creation of heaven and earth.”

The divine word of command brings into existence what it expresses.

Throughout Scripture the word of God is consistently creative and effective. It is light that immediately manifests completely the divine word that ends the darkness and chaos. Chaos is dependent on darkness as in the total darkness of the primordial state any movement is chaotic since it cannot be seen, avoided, structured or compensated for. Light denies the randomness of dark action, it reveals the unknown, unexpected shift in movement. Light is the antithesis literally and metaphorically of darkness but the distinction may be unclear. The polar opposites of black and white seem distinct but are contiguous on paper or canvas. For humanity the distinguishing characteristics of light are defined by what we can tolerate or require and not by any scale of purity or strength. In the deserts of Arabia the strong light has to be blocked from above and existence takes on a panoramic horizontal quality whereas in Europe the weaker light enables a vertical appreciation of the landscape and life.

Light appears as immediacy, dispelling darkness and is the initial will of the Spirit. This initial creation of light is absolute spirit, a pure form in its formlessness, and an instantaneous manifestation of the Godhead. Light exists on Day 1 before the creation of the sun and solar structure and the first is the last as all things are seen, developed and known in the light. This balance of the first and the last is not a simple coincidence of opposites; light and life are the same in their immediacy where the movement from light to life starts with instantaneous illumination and ends with an absolute kenosis; a self emptying of absolute spirit into life. While this light was divine it too was not a 'thing to be grasped' but took 'the form of a servant' (Phil. 2:6-8) and did nothing 'from selfishness or conceit'. The first light of creation is the first structured act, is not sunlight, and is commended as good – God is prejudiced in favour of his light

²⁴Wenham. G. World Biblical Commentary Vol. 1. Word Books, Waco, Texas. 1987. P. 11.

which is unique at that point. The division of day and night is an act of separation not banishment or cessation; darkness can be separated from light and is utilised to order and number the process of days. It is light that reveals the order of creation; the luminaries are created under the original light of the cosmos and illuminating the earth is their task, not separating darkness from light, which was the task of the original created light, an absolute light created especially for that initial purpose and unlike 'the larger' and 'the smaller light'. The sun and moon are mere luminaries whose task it is to give light; they are not of light. The word used for that light outwith Genesis "is always used in the Pentateuch to designate the sanctuary lamp in the tabernacle."²⁵

Creation is the integration of being and nothing, "a unity in which being and nothing are distinguished from each other in the beginning"²⁶ as it is essential to the creative act, as creation is the only way to being. Creation out of actual darkness, an absolute void "in a moment of immanent transition of opposites into each other."²⁷ This initial creation was of absolute light, a total light that was good, perfect in its obliteration of darkness, but that could not be maintained as the creation of order incorporated the creation of ordered time.

The perfection of the first light is an important and essential truth, an absolute light corresponding to the perfection of God's own goodness. Light can be seen as a theological term wherein the formlessness of light gives rise to form; being, as light, emerges into totality. God's word caused light to shine but this was not a passive emanation issuing from the Godhead but an act of divine will, and of a thought lying at the basis of this. That light is the finest of the elementary forces. It is of itself, independent of substance, absolutely good, the first fruit of creation.

The created light may then be seen as a positive form of negation as creation was an ultimate act of self-negation by God, that was echoed in the crucifixion, and only these acts of kenosis, as an outpouring of light, could dissolve the original and total darkness. It can be seen that initial light is the will of God in all its

²⁵Wenham. P. 22.

²⁶Altizer. T. The Genesis Of God. Westminster/JKP., Louisville, Kentucky. 1993. P. 13

²⁷Altizer. P. 22.

perfection (Job 38:19-20); it is the subject of his pleasure, and its creation is finished and concluded in its absolute perfection, and does not correspond to what we presently know as light.

The New Testament.

Within a few decades of Jesus' death his story had evolved from a narrative of his life to a textual event wherein his followers could interpret their own efforts and trials, their achievements and aspirations. In scattered early Christian communities the rituals of baptism and the institution of the last supper wove Jesus' life, death and resurrection into their own existence. The Gospel of John indicates the mindset of such a community exiled from the synagogue, expelled by 'the Jews' they now see as opposition. In the redefining role of these groups there is a balance between the assurance of God's gracious love for all true believers - with direct warnings that anyone who 'does not believe is condemned already' (Jn.3:18).

The divine creation of initial light can be seen as a *kenotic* act whereby the divine Word links the creator and creation and in a second *kenosis* we have the *Logos* incarnate. Jesus was the way, the truth and the light – the light made flesh – 'the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light' (Jn.3:19). Hating the light denotes the individual as evil and only 'he who does what is true comes to the light' (Jn.3:21): in other words any approach differing from theirs is wrong, evil and of the darkness.

The fact that God created humanity 'in our image, after our likeness' (Gen.1:26), is blessed and given dominion over the earth and is seen as 'very good' (Gen.1:31) seems discounted. The creation in humanity of a divine spark; that soul which humanity carries, sets in all of us a small divine light whereas the Gospel of John sets a serious limit on what is to be tolerated and the priorities are from, and can only be from, the source of light – Jesus, the pre-existing word, existing before and of light. Other texts do “not tell us what to believe but challenge us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves”²⁸ by kindling our own divine spark in the light of Jesus' teachings. John's Gospel defends stoutly certain views of Jesus and condemns others, specifically the notion that “God's light

²⁸Pagels. E. Beyond Belief. Macmillan, London. 2003. P. 32.

shines not only in Jesus but, potentially at least, in everyone.”²⁹ The Gospel of John demanded a single unified approach to Christianity and the formation of a single church. The Gospel of Luke has an emphasis on the individual's search for God as 'the kingdom of God is within you' (Lk.17:21). The strength of this saying in the Gospel of Luke lies in the fact that it does not tell the reader what to believe but challenges them to discover their inner light; what really is within themselves, and in the acceptance and determination of that challenge they are judged. This is the fundamental device used by Jesus in all his parables. Inherent in this process is the notion that 'goodness' is within all of humanity; the light shines within us all but discrimination is necessary and judgement has to be recognised and enhanced. John's Gospel insisted we were drawn to God by the light of Christ. The Gospel of Luke contains the notion that the light of God is potentially in all of us, that we are made in God's image and our search for the divine is an individual one, as individual as the image hidden within us. Jesus, for John and Luke, is God's own light in human form, a tension between them arises in the Johannine dismissal of the divine spark held individually. The individual had status as a created being as 'the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light' (Lk. 16:8).

In the Gospel of John light is presented as a duality; inseparable and indistinguishable, with God and of God, and separate from darkness. “The word that is the light (Jn 1:4-5) may refer to the advent of the word made flesh or to the enlightening presence of the word before the advent of Jesus.”³⁰ Whatever the case it shines in a similarly dualistic darkness, that of the blackness before creation, and of the non-enlightened state of some of humanity. The darkness cannot overcome the light but neither is it explicitly eradicated, conquered or overrun. The source of darkness in John, where John the Baptist comprehensively states, “all things were made through him” opens the argument that darkness is either an element independent of God or that it too was made by God. The interpretation of the Fourth Gospel has Brown posing this as the work

²⁹ Pagels. P. 34.

³⁰ Jasper. A. The Shining Garment of The Text. Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield. 1998. P. 223.

of sin emerging from humanity, or the 'ethical' quality of all those opposed to the word as forwarded by Barrett, whereas Lindars sees this as any threat to God's fulfilment of creation. A creation sourced in darkness, that "excludes darkness but cannot eclipse it altogether"³¹ and has to forge a relationship with light and darkness.

Darkness covers the face of the deep – conceals the surface, hides any texture or patterning, any trace of activity. Such a darkness is total blackness; an absolute antithesis of light and just as light can blind and burn so darkness can envelope and oppress; 'a darkness that can be felt' (Ex.10:21). The complete darkness of a cave is a palpable thing. To be in darkness so deep that you literally cannot see your hand in front of your face is a strange and disturbing experience. To be left in such an environment for any length of time, to be 'thrown into the outer darkness' (Mt.8:12) is to enter an apocalyptic nightmare. Madness is located in the extremes of both light and dark, and our creatureliness will not allow us to colonise either ultimate end of the spectrum. The prologue to the Gospel of John allows us to contemplate this chaos as the narrator "views events from a transcendent and eternal vantage point."³²

³¹ Jasper. P. 227.

³²Stibbe. M. John. Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield. 1996. P. 22/23.

The Prologue of The Gospel of John.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God;
all things were made through him,
and without him was not anything made that was made.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not
overcome it.'

The Gospel According to John 1:1-5. (RSV)

The prologue of this Gospel acts as an aspect of theomimesis in that the lack of introduction or foreword and its sudden creative eruption resonates with the nature of creation itself. It effects an *ex nihilo* aftershock echoing Genesis. The Gospel acts as a single great parable “and is fully comprehensible only to the man who knows the whole Gospel”³³ and this parabolic characteristic of return and re-examination of the text is a significant feature of this Gospel.

The notion of light in John is centred on the capacity of allowing men to see; facilitating orientation as sight is then what allows man an understanding of himself and the world. Light is then not a source of illumination but a brightness and “brightness itself is not therefore an outward phenomenon, but is the illumined condition of existence.”³⁴ Light is both metaphor and visible, almost tangible, reality. The perfection of light enacts a presence of the divine. Light is participation with the created order; a substantiation of existence whose reality allows the formation of life. Balance, reason and light all operate on the edge of known and unknown, on the margins of the human and totally other, and it is the balance of light that makes the invisible visible. 'God is light' (1 John 1:5) and

³³Bultmann. R. The Gospel of John – A Commentary. (Trans, Beasley-Murray. G.) Blackwell, Oxford. 197. P. 13.

³⁴Bultmann. P. 41.

“God is the light by whose diffused radiations we apprehend the phenomenal world.”³⁵God is that light that enables reason, logos and balance and the glory of light is its facilitation of equilibrium and detachment.

Light becomes the power of being, the norm of behaviour or personal integrity. Light as the illumined quality of existence denotes happiness and salvation. The eschatological dimension of light is integral as “the definitive illumination of existence does not lie within human possibilities, but can only be a divine gift.”³⁶Divinity then is the grace of the radiating archetypal light – Jesus is the light as he is the revealer; by giving light he gives life and the inherent eschatological aspect. The use of light as symbolising certain mental and spiritual qualities is one of the most universal, and an immediately acceptable indicator of intellectual clarity, kingship and divinity. The contrast between light and dark has been seen in Judaism as an aspect of divine control (Amos 5:8), as necessary for health (Isa. 58:8), for salvation (Mic. 7:8, Isa. 60:1) for happiness (Isa. 9:2, Amos 5:18) and to signify the contrast between good and evil; “an archetypal symbol, rooted in the deepest instinct of the human race.”³⁷In ancient Persia black existed as a colour and was considered to be of greater significance than white as it was deemed the source of all colour but in European tradition black has been considered to be the condition of an absence of light. The focal point of our sight is the black pupil in the centre of our iris. The portal to a tiny chamber where darkness is essential to resolve the problems of light and image. We meet each other 'eye to eye' in an effort to see the interior, to glimpse the inner truth of the individual concerned as the pupil is at once the boundary and the veil, concealing and revealing both internal and external vision. We look to scan the interior and are met by a reflection of ourself blocking the inner view and what was deemed to be contemplation becomes speculation, mirror gazing through a dark glass. “The black pupil also represents the ground of nothingness, the place before and after the image”³⁸- a void within us, the counter to the bright

³⁵Jasper. A. The Shining Garment of The Text. Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield. 1998. P. 223.

³⁶Bultmann. P. 43.

³⁷Ashton. J. Understanding the Fourth Gospel. Clarendon, Oxford. 1991. P. 208.

³⁸Viola. B. Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House. Thames & Hudson, London. 2005. P. 207.

disc of the sun. It is the balance between the self and the world; between the possible chaos within and the seeming assurance of the sunlight.

The use of light as emblematic of the revealer of the Johannine Gospel is, from the outset, so dramatic that its metaphor dominates the narrative. Within the Prologue the overlap of *logos* with life and light permeates the text where 'the life was the light of men' (Jn.1:4).

“The Prologue links logos, life and light so powerfully that the cluster dominates the symbolic system of the entire narrative.”³⁹ Light means life and the conflict of light and darkness evokes a universal, primordial state. In John sight and blindness equate with light and dark which equate with seeing and believing where all are born blind and sight is always offered in the theme of sight to insight, from belief to faith. John regards the *logos* as the exclusive source of light for men and 'darkness has not overcome it' (1:5) but the translation of this phrase is problematic. Darkness has not comprehended the light is another accepted translation but the etymological source also includes the notion that darkness has not seized, overtaken, overwhelmed or surprised the light, that it cannot force or compel light to stop, or grasp or take hold of it. John the Baptist bears witness to it (1:8), as the 'true light' is coming into the world (1:9) and will act as a judgement due to the fact that men love darkness (3:19). The Pharisees move from sight/understanding to ignorance (exposed by irony) to blindness, regarded as sin in those who reject the light (3:19). It is not that light of itself has the capacity to deceive but that the purity of its nature has the capacity to reveal the ethical problem. Jesus, as light, reveals the ethical decision. His parabolic teaching was never framed in terms of good or bad but consistently forced a judgement from the individual.

Light is seen as healing, exposing and judging, and night and day become subordinate symbols where Nicodemus comes by night (3:2) as do the 'Jews' (9:10, 11:10), and Judas goes into the night (13:30) while we are ordered to walk in the light (12:35/6). Other sections exhibit the movement from dark to light as the right way – Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb in darkness (20:1) but sees

³⁹Culpepper. A. Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. Fortress Press, Philadelphia. 1983. P. 190.

light figures, the disciples experience futile fishing in darkness (21:4) yet take a big catch at daybreak.

At the eschaton, at the collapse of history we are present in the eternal now of timeless light where truth is the word of God revealed in the light of Christ. Light reveals *logos* and the nature of men; it shines, reveals and exposes the light of the world (1:9, 8:12). By the last chapter of John the symbol has “expanded to the point of explosion so that the mere suggestion of its presence evokes the heavy thematic and theological load it acquired in its earlier, more explicit development.”⁴⁰ In the end the symbols are powerful, loaded and ambiguous allowing a sense of implication and indefinable overtones “which continue to excite imagination, expose mystery, and evoke response.”⁴¹

Light is an affirmation the response to which is a judgement on the individual. It has an attributive and interpretive role. Light is the core of Jesus; it is a sacramental reflection of the kingdom and the life he represents as through light “everything in the world is capable of 're-presenting' the realm and reality of its creator.”⁴² The core symbol of light is integrally linked to the purpose of the Gospel and the declaration of the prologue. The symbols in John unite the concrete world with the abstract – light gives “immediacy, approachability and even perceptibility, while never robbing it of the mystery or relieving the judgement upon those who fail to understand it.”⁴³

In Christ an inconceivable, transcendent God is made flesh. The transfiguration (Lk.9:3) revealed a previously unknown, incredible light that at once revealed yet hid the invisible God made visible in Christ. Where white symbolises light and brightness it also denotes purity and the glory of innocence. Seeing God was thereafter comprehended fundamentally in terms of light whether for spiritual purposes or physical ones, where the representation of the divine in painting was through white as indicating light.

⁴⁰Culpepper. P. 192.

⁴¹Culpepper. P. 192.

⁴²Culpepper. P. 201.

⁴³Culpepper. P.201.

Christianity can be seen as a form of detachment. Early Christians in the Pauline world were cut off from their past by a new morally orientated life that restarted at baptism, and the contemporary presentation of a lit candle at baptism continues the theme of new light coming into the new life. The new identity created a new society which required a new space, a detached space of spiritual reality for the Body of Christ. Originally this detachment was a mental construct, a cerebral space shared with others; Church in a sense but not yet a building. Their detachment was non-worldly and other worldly, putting on Christ as a space within which they could imitate Christ (Phil. 2:6-11) or Paul, or engage in the Apostolic role of a life of spirit, sinless and eternal within the Christian construct. Herein occurred the mapping out of direction, achieved by the naming of parts. This re-invention of history may only be deemed different as a matter of language but the formation of a pre-liturgical vocabulary replaced the past by defining presence. The ascetic movement out into the desert, from the middle of the third century, was not accidental. It imposed rules of life, cells of prayer and of sacrifice. Jesus' movement from place to place eroded the notion of a single sacred space; it disposed of the notion that worship could only be accomplished in the temple as 'the kingdom of God is within you' (Lk. 17:21). The movement to the desert was to the pure realm of non space, the cleanliness of desolation and light, and may be comparable to Jesus' treatment, or attempted cleansing, of the Temple (Mk.11:15-19) whose loss in 70CE echoes the earlier loss and is a return to the desolation of the desert.

The desert created a great unknown space in early geography and, just as the spaces in narrative are filled by the reader, as what is not pronounced is still interpreted, the ascetic supplied an interpretation of the desert. The movement into the desert was comparable with coming into presence. In the heat flattened space of the desert, the minimalist space of great desolation where distance was a variable commodity, presence could be sensed. Here on the edge of existence self-perception, an awareness of the dream dreaming us, could be achieved as,

for these early ascetics, the desert was not an illusion of death but an actual place of death, the wholly other landscape of burning light, the absolute antithesis to the idea of settlement. The desert was quiet yet disturbing, calm yet strange, and its vastness induced a movement to silence and space. This space was all boundary and frontier; a space without centre, a void of margins and edges and light. What safety that may have been sensed from its horizontal nature could be dissolved as the inherent danger of this state lay in the notion of apparition. Movement on the edge of space, on the rim of awareness creates an awareness of edge and the frailty of being in nothingness. The edge may help to delineate space, define parameters and thereby increase perception, refining what we see and understand but any encounter on the frontier of existence is with the totally other and confronting infinity may be a bruising experience where contact and disengagement acknowledge that it is no sin to limp.

This space was displacement and in this non space, under the light of this dislocated environment, existed the questions, uncertainties, wonders and risks of existence. The desert was a way of stepping out of the world; “getting lost is the only way to really challenge everything one knows and believes in.”⁴⁴

The quest of the Desert Fathers, as these ascetics became known, was essentially a search for freedom. A freedom to be oneself and also to be free of oneself. The combination of seclusion and interiority promoted a challenge to the conventions of reason and understanding. Detachment from self released the mind to explore and question their being, and in the serenity of solitude to approach this in a new and more profound way.

What occurred was both interpretation and experimentation. Actions here re-created, re-formed space and re-determined the nature of desolation since the desert was non-hierarchical, non-standard, non-controlled and non-authoritarian. This was trauma space, a place of re-generation or neo-generation, and the transactions within that space enabled focus, discovery, and created new human constructs that generated a further process of creation that resisted closure and changed practice. The ascetic movement out and into a non dominant, non abusive structure was a positive response to the divine. In locating themselves

⁴⁴Tobias. M. 'Sinai' in The Winding Trail. Smith. R. (Ed) Diadem, London. 1981. P. 247.

away from society they enhanced their own sense of the created order being sacred, of having presence, of being imbued with the divine and endorsing this with their practice and dedication.

The movement from desert to cave to body were all seen as aspects of light where the divine light of existence could allow a focus on the divine spark within us; where the limitations of our achievements could be enhanced by limitations in our environment. This 'less is more' initiative saw desire as a non integrative aspect in our lives and humility as being conducive to clarity of mind. While one could not engage with a light, only experience it, it was the light that facilitated the struggle of engagement to take place. The 'now' of the present, constantly beyond us, could be constantly sought within this area of risk and temptation where a concentrated study of Scripture could allow entry to the text and in embodying the Bible they might embody the divine in a process of absolute self emptying. They recognised that the soul longed for silence, a silence that was only available in matter, and to be matter was to be in the 'now' of the present which was to be incarnate.

Apophatic Theology.

'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even so as I have been fully understood.' (1 Cor. 13:12)

Apophatic Theology is linguistically linked with the *via negativa* as it comes from the verb *apophemi* – to reject, or say no to. It is a negative theology insofar as it is totally conscious that God transcends all created conceptions, that it can only determine what God is not rather than asserting claims as to what God is or to know God himself.

Apophatic Theology allows us to see that the transcendent otherness of God is only comprehended by what God is not. What is deemed inexpressible and incomprehensible is of God; his truth is beyond language or concept as truth, as a concept can have no limits. It is knowledge of truth that is equated with experience that is limited but can be delimited by detachment whereby a more profound meaning of concepts may be contemplated.

. Theology becomes apophatic where it does not equate knowledge with experience, with subjective interpretation or individual pietic discovery. Rather knowledge involves a personal participation in the common experiences of the Church as a whole. This knowledge can never be said to be definitive. It imposes itself within the dynamic participation of each individual in the whole Church. This form of theology does not deny or refuse to formulate the truth of the Church as it uses both affirmative and negative avenues of approach. In both forms it reveals a description or sign of the truth. It neither denies nor adulterates the content of common terms since we do not know God's nature but we do know his person manifested in the works of his energy, his will and his creative power. We know the person only in the fact of a relation that constantly mediates knowledge but never exhausts it. It seeks truth in relation to a common meaning

that makes social understanding possible. Knowledge is achieved through contemplation or in viewing the truth with the eyes of the soul; the soul is what arrives at the concept and makes knowledge possible, and the soul is the whole person. Conceptual antithesis also make it possible for us to grasp the truths that must be expressed not only in thought but with the whole person.

It is within apophatic theology that a direct link is seen with creative art, especially painting, and within that tradition especially with abstract painting. “A pure, apophatic formulation of theology is pictorial. Concepts transcend one another and thus make it possible for us to go beyond the obvious meaning.”⁴⁵ Theology is apophatic if it goes beyond an acknowledged linguistic formulation or detailed conceptual account. Similarly painting is abstract if it enters an area beyond delineation, where form becomes form-less. Abstraction also seeks a truth in relation to common meaning whereby social understanding is achieved. In apophatics, knowledge in non knowing, the nameless name, the ineffable word, are all antithetical terms that transcend obvious meanings and create a picture using words to elucidate a truth that is beyond words and in abstraction the production of the formless form and the shapeless shape is sought, not as definitive or positive knowledge but as a reflection of the truth. This is dependent on an “ontology that has as its centre the truth of a person”⁴⁶ - the person of God. Nature and person, and nature and energies form the basis of apophatic theology and resonate with the creative drive of the nature and person of the artist, and the nature and energy of the work produced. To follow the road of the *via negativa* is to strive to be united with the ultimate reality – God, who transcends reason and thought, and is honoured in silence. This can be seen as the purist form of devotion, again resonating with abstract painting which induces silence in works that connote an ineffable presence.

⁴⁵Yannaras. C. The Encyclopaedia of Christianity. Vol. 1. Eerdmans/Brill, Cambridge. 1999. P. 106.

⁴⁶Yannaras. P. 106.

Chapter Two.

The Art/Theology Intersection.

Despite the nature of the term the purpose of the *via negativa* was to affirm the oneness of God with the Logos. By the incarnation “that which is completely inexpressible and incomprehensible to all created intellects” became that which “can to a certain extent be grasped by human understanding.”⁴⁷ No one could know the essence of God, and those who said they did thereby revealed that they knew nothing; but the love and power of God had been made apparent in Christ. What binds all the artists and works discussed together is what Denys Turner⁴⁸ refers to as “apophatic anthropology” which is as radical as their apophatic painting and closely linked to it. All the works examined exhibit a concern for qualities of light that extends beyond the rendition of effect or depiction of a natural phenomenon. They all, both figurative and abstract works, possess a visionary quality that induces in the viewer a contemplative aspect that is provocative and parabolic, and takes the individual beyond the anecdotal or narrative significance of the painting. With all the artists discussed, and in the works selected, there is similarly revealed a denial of self that goes beyond the artistic nature's need to assert individuality, or self-identity, as a promotional aspect. These artists have also avoided the identity of self within a unified group or school of thought. Any basis of self, or of group identity, in these works lies in their unique features and in the nature of their interiority where, despite the centuries between them, there is exposed a process of determining their own deepest inwardness, whereby they depict a resonance beyond description and far

⁴⁷Maximus the Confessor. Selected Writings. (Trans.) Berthold. G. Paulist Press, New York. 2004. P. 8.

⁴⁸Turner. D. The Darkness of God. CUP. 1999.

from experience. They have independently structured an apophatic language for their art derived from the apophaticism of language they have had to construct to contemplate their own interiority.

Central to the darkness of innermost meditation is the notion that there is something unknown about the self. “The metaphor of the ‘light of the soul’ is at the centre of Eckhart’s theology and mysticism.”⁴⁹ Whether it is the ‘spark’, ‘fortress’ or ‘ground’ of the soul the terms relate to the ‘refuge’, ‘silence’ or ‘desert’ of the self at its deepest level and contribute to the notion of apophatic anthropology where total self is unknowable, which relates to the definitive aspect of apophatic theology, which acknowledges that God is unknowable. This is articulated by these artists in insisting we contemplate the strange and dislocated, the unutterable and unnameable. In these paintings ‘the self’ is nameless – “nameless with the namelessness of the Godhead itself.”⁵⁰

There could never be a school of painting that unified style or treatment of this art because of the distinctiveness of the individuals’ identification of their interiority; their own ‘light of the soul’ and its unique relation to infinity.

The movement to interiority is by a process of renunciation and this requires a strong faith of the individual whose “unswerving hope is the gateway to detachment.”⁵¹ The parallel categories of detachment and interiority produce the artistic experience. These categories are not experiences in themselves; they shape and transform human experience, they reason a purpose to artistic activity. They operate not like nouns but like verbs being “practices for the transformation of experience.”⁵² Detachment and interiority form the aesthetical grounding for all the paintings discussed.

It follows that attachment, and the need for exteriority, is ultimately destructive as the desire to contain or bury the nothingness is centred on self and self-image. Possessiveness is the element whose ultimate aim is the possession of self. The

⁴⁹ Turner. D. The Darkness of God. CUP. 1999. P. 140.

⁵⁰ Turner. P. 141.

⁵¹ Climacus. J. The Ladder of Divine Ascent. (Trans. by Luibheid. C. & Russell. N.) Paulist Press, New Jersey. 1982. P. 256.

⁵² Turner. P. 179.

need to have one's own core; not the unnameable nothing of the abyss but an identity that can be owned and defined by ownership.

The final encompassing aspect of apophatic anthropology, where nothing is going to unite or unify these artists or their works, is the undoubted distinctiveness of their language alongside the novelty of their thought despite the differences in time and culture. Their pursuit of interiority, detachment and uniqueness has led to statements that reveal the point where self identity expands into unknown light, "that point of deepest 'selfhood' with the uncreated light with which it intersects."⁵³

The search for detachment; freedom from worldly concerns, the untroubled existence that allows a level of concentration to deepen and in that depth to draw on, past humility, to the borders of nothingness, is an aspect all these artists have approached. A detachment that "is so near nothingness that nothing is so delicate that it could remain in detachment except God alone."⁵⁴

Detachment has the facility to remain in itself, be untroubled by anything, and allow those who stand within it completely to be drawn into eternity in such a way that they become ignorant of the physical world and the problems of life. The level of interiority achieved is of a spiritual nature, immovable against opinion or protest and of a purity and simplicity that is immutable and attracted by infinity. "It purifies the soul, cleanses the conscience, inflames the heart, arouses the spirit, quickens desire and makes God known."⁵⁵

Cenobites (from the Greek, *Koinos* + *Bios* – communal + life) developed a communal rule of life that was marked by their unity of interests and responsibilities. These solidarities, marked by their unity of interests and responsibilities, eventually formed the great monastic settlements dispersed across the desolate spaces of Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt, whereas the ascetic solitaries chose their own way and their own individual rhythm of life, isolated from the others and spending their days in "total solitude, shallow but

⁵³ Turner. P. 254,

⁵⁴ Clark. J. & Skinner. J. (Trans) Meister Eckhart. Faber & Faber, London. 1958. P. 161.

⁵⁵ Clark & Skinner. P. 170.

impenetrable solitude.”⁵⁶ Detachment was common to both but while the former cultivated a communal quietness the latter desired an individual quality derived from the great silence of the desert. For both the abiding love of God (1 Jn. 4:16) offered, as it did to the painters of New York, the energy of creation, preservation and salvation.

This solitary aspect may be applied to the painter generally as light and space were the Alpha and Omega of the artist before a canvas, and specifically to the Modern painter where the unused depth, the denied illusion had form; their apparent emptiness had meaning just as boldly and effectively as the canvas filled with perspective. The communal rule of perspectival painting was seemingly ended by the confusion of the language of abstract painting and the apparent loss of illusionistic depth. The confusion and sense of loss within the art community was generated “because the end of a story told in a strange language is like the end not of that story but of some other.”⁵⁷ Just like this fictional footnote, that is an example of a moment in an individual text that can allow the reader to see the light, so the abstract artists took the viewer out of the dimensions of normality whereby what is acceptable was redetermined and precipitated a more profound engagement in the *kenotic*/incarnational event that was being sought and attempted by these artists.

Within the history of Art there is a fine thread in painting can be seen as the most positive area of artistic creation in that it offered to indicate to us 'the way to the dwelling of light' (Job 38:19). Successive artists have applied themselves to the creation of light effects, the examination of dark and light masses within the painted surface, and the fusion and separation of clarity and obscurity through the use of light.

The creative impact of Abstract Expressionism can be seen as an outpouring of emotional energy which broke from the darkness of figurative art and the confines of perspective, that had led to the dread limits of representation at its self-alienated core. The movement to abstraction negated the self in absolutes of form and colour, and in a realisation of the absolute totality of light and being.

⁵⁶Pavic. M. Landscape Painted with Tea. Penguin, London. 1990. P. 7.

⁵⁷Pavic. P. 57.

“Disruption is the act of the creator”⁵⁸ and intrusion into the figurative process in painting could lead to a new area of involvement, a transfigurative involvement, involvement with light as central to the painting process. The decline of figurative art saw the end of a historic pattern of development in painting. This held a Christological echo in the notion of the *Logos* as divine reason insuring there was an inherent rationality, structure and order, and in that movement towards formlessness there was an orientation allowing humanity 'to become partakers in the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4). Light as an entity had not previously been sought, only the effects of light. Light as colour would be tackled with the rise of Impressionism. Light as an infinite, widening entity, light as a formless form would not be approached until Abstract Expressionism. The search for, and utilisation of, light in abstract canvases did not signify the end of art but was a means to approach 'the way to the dwelling of light'; a process that allowed the artist to condense the notion of light into an object of perception. It was the exploration of space and light and our place within it. What had been avoided, in the sense of being unchallenged, in the past was the unacceptable present tense of light; the structured cadences of shadow, the timbre of tone. In the search and development of perspectival perfection there was an unlimited 'now' that imposed a painful perception, to the extent that there was a determined preference for the bitter, dark ocean of evanescent shade. Abstract painting understood the potency and exhilaration of space and restored a direction to humanity abandoned in centuries of perspectival devices and the often over dramatised gloom of chiaroscuro. This could be likened to 'the place of darkness' and an escape from one of Piranesi's *Prisons* where imagination was no longer chained to geometric devices and tonal gradations realigned the viewer to 'the dwelling of light'. Space and light bore the vision of the realm within us and painting drew it out.

The solitaires of the desert like the New York abstract painters “considered the essence of their vocation to be the discovery of hidden possibilities.”⁵⁹ The parallels for artistic light and space could be seen in the modern sacred as a

⁵⁸Altizer. P. 97.

⁵⁹Pavic. P. 85.

secular sacred. What was required was a sacred experience, an encounter creating a new vision. A fixed point allowing future orientation, permitting direction into the desolate expanse. This movement in the New York of the 1950's contained the same fear, attraction and enthrallment as the desert. A threshold crossed, a frontier expanded and the ordered world of painting was challenged by uncertainty, anxiety and disruption – artistic 'death' was equated to desolation. The ordered world of Art had style and direction, and knew it. The desolation of the abstract desert knew disorientation and dislocation; where the centre, if it existed, must be sought and direction must be found. The experience of abstraction ruptured reality and allowed re-orientation, a re-configuration what was deemed, prior to the abstract impact, a wasteland.

They entered not the desert but the cave; its New York parallel – the studio, and as the withdrawal into the cave created new direction and greater understanding so the confines of the studio produced a space that allowed a scepticism of reality, an acceptance of otherness. The 'now' of where the artist was, what the experience was, disrupted the constant frontier painting had assumed and pushed the painted activity into the seeming desolation of deconstruction.

Painting, not only as a denial of attachment to worldly concerns, nor even of self, but loosed and stripped of anxiety it is free to operate in an unrestricted manner querying statements of fashion, notions of beauty, and schools of thought, to push towards an honesty of treatment and questioning of values. The stance for the artist can be singular and independent, to say nothing of lonely for “detachment is good and its mother is exile.”⁶⁰ The denial of self and status, and the push to interiority, takes the artist beyond the limits of the artistic community. Working in isolation without a frame of reference or the small support of the previous generation of painters makes the artist operate on the frontier of the unknown and unknowing where demons may lurk in the darkness. This detachment requires a re-centring of interest and activity, which must strengthen itself from a position of initial weakness by disassociating itself from the worldly or common place, the commercial or the promotional prospect. The renunciation of these propositions may be assailed by false humanity, or conceit

⁶⁰ Climacus. P. 86.

may retain an interest in interiority as a form of secret despidal of those who work within the mainstream. Detachment demands endurance and suffering, trial and perseverance. This is not escape, which is merely running away from the world and its misery. If this is the motive for apparent withdrawal what results is the promotion of the individual as a pseudo-unique practitioner “yet they quickly withered when transplanted to desert soil, to where the world did not walk.”⁶¹ Detachment must endure opposition, suffer neglect and tolerate violent arrogance against it. It can be met with injustice, slander and contempt, and if it is to succeed fully its practitioners must ignore worldly concerns, deny selfishness, and finally reject the vanity that can follow the breakthrough into the inner core of being.

⁶¹ Climacus. P. 82.

Light as Form and Symbol in Western Art.

Any study within the iconography of light will invariably probe the assumptions we make in our culture with a focussed, penetrating beam revealing the angles and refractions of vision that Christian faith brings to our lives. It is definitive that the arts generally and painting specifically “must contribute to theology not by illustration of what we already know but by what they themselves uniquely do.”⁶² Art provokes us to examine in new and different ways, beyond the obvious, to a truth concealed around us. The reality of existence can be unlocked by art. The conventions of everyday life can be disclosed by painting as merely an entrance to a separate reality, and that reality may lead us to a disclosure of infinity.

15th Century painting was dominated by the increasing importance of 'naturalism' in depiction; that movement towards a mirror of reality, and of a geometric perspective, not only for the enhancement of illusionistic depth but also in a drive to raise the status of the activity from artisan craftsmanship to an intellectual discipline by the insistence on mathematical and theoretical aspects of the process, revealed in their work but discussed and taught only with and to initiates. The 14th Century perspectival innovations of Giotto, Duccio, Martini and Lorenzetti in rendering the illusion of space and solidity were improved on by Piero, Veneziano and the Van Eycks in their representation of light. Objects became recognisable from fixed points of view under fixed conditions of light and thus acquired a new illusionistic dimension and approximated more closely to the objects of the world. “Light was at once substance and medium. All things reflected their source, the light that is God and God’s emanation.”⁶³ The newly acquired subtlety of light allowed the development of personality, mood, and suggested movement. Creation mirrored God and man’s creation in art displayed the harmony present on earth. The inclusion of shadows, of fire, of burning

⁶² Dillenberger, J. A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities. SCM, London. 1987. P. 220.

⁶³ Dillenberger. P. 40.

candles, and of the sun became main components of action. “Christian mysteries were from the very beginning explained by metaphors of light”⁶⁴ and it was in the 15th Century that these aspects assumed the vivid form they had originally inspired as symbols in earlier work. “Light as the modality for knowing and experiencing God, with light as the source and form of God’s presence”⁶⁵ came to prominence in European art where before fire had been seen as a noble element and its depiction in art could display or indicate the sacred. Light became symbolic of Christ in reference to his words indicating him as the Light of the World (Jn.8:12) but a number of symbols evolved to suggest the divine nature, or holiness, of the persons portrayed in religious paintings.

The *Aureole* was used as a symbol of divinity and therefore of supreme power. It was reserved for representations of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and of the Trinity. Occasionally this has been extended to the Virgin Mary. The *Aureole* consists of a field of radiance and splendour which encircles the whole body and appears to emerge from it. It may cling to the body form as a fringe of light or issue from a central point as luminous rays. It is structured as pointed flames often rendered as a rainbow. Early ones were white but by the Renaissance gold was employed to depict divine light. A blue aureole has occasionally been used to indicate celestial glory.

The *Mandorla* was a development of the aureole enclosed in an almond shape that encased the whole body of the subject depicted. The *Mandorla* was often utilised with Christ at the Last Judgement and occasionally with the Virgin Mary in representations of the Assumption. On some few occasions a group of seven doves, indicating the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, have served as a mandorla. Even rarer is the use of a group of angels forming the mandorla.

The *Halo* or *Nimbus* is that zone of light generally represented by a circle, but squares and triangles have been used, placed behind the head of a divine or sacred figure to identify their great dignity. Stylisation of the *Nimbus* led to the triangular shape being used to indicate God as the Trinity without any figurative

⁶⁴ Meiss, M. ‘Light as Form and Symbol in Some 15th Century Paintings’ *The Art Bulletin* 27, 1945.

⁶⁵ Dillenberger. P. 40.

representation. The nimbus of the Virgin Mary is always circular and often richly decorated whereas those of saints are left without ornamentation. The *Cruciform Nimbus* refers to redemption through the cross and is correspondingly only used in portrayals of Christ. The square formed nimbus was used to denote living persons, often donors, from the saints; the square being deemed inferior to the circle it represented the earthly as opposed to the eternal circle of the divine. Occasionally a multi sided nimbus, often hexagonal, was used to denote allegorical figures or those representing the virtues.

Glory is a luminous glow that combines the nimbus and the aureole and expresses the most exalted state of divinity reserved for the Lord of Heaven or for Christ as Judge.

Fascinated by this new development leading Flemish painters adopted striking symbolic images current in medieval thought related to the Annunciation where light could pierce solid form without harm and render the miraculous. The Virgin was seen as a window through whom the light of God had passed. Often a band of seven rays of light was depicted to symbolise the seven spirits (Rev. 5:6). Occasionally “the radiant window alone, without a visible beam of light, may refer to the virgin and the miraculous conception.”⁶⁶

Light is the device that represents the divine and implies the possibility of a shared communication, blinding at times, intransigent in direction, but constantly capable of illumination. At this level light can evoke an archaic, pre-Chaldean language conveying the power of life and death while muting the effect with comforting warmth. Light may appear timeless yet is yoked archetypally to a deep sense of time, a 'dawn of time', far from the everyday or customary. No words or message give voice to the power of light, which is left to the private world of individual response. A power that may shed light on the archival and historical aspects of theology, and whose blinding silence denies closure. The burden of signification falls on those bathed in light, but light may distort or blind and apparent Utopian dreams may shimmer in a heat haze, or create a shifting, distant shadow of light on light where there is nothing solid to anchor

⁶⁶ Meiss. P. 179.

the radiance and theology's charge becomes an echo from the past that floats and effervesces with an acidic irony due to its apparent lack of gravity.

Hermeneutics operate on painting, probing and questioning the redemptive notion of light, denying solace, refusing closure, refining interpretation. Light can avoid the iconic by its scale; the hand held, the manufactured, are dwarfed by the greater that cannot be apprehended from a single vantage point. Light has source perhaps but no centre, no omphalos for the eye or body, no resting place and no therapeutic religious catharsis. Under the light anamnesis is a personal rather than collective task and the injunction to remember becomes the onus of the individual. The iconocentric image of light utilised in painting is all too often a detraction arresting the viewer's attention by the spectacle of a signifier that disrupts the referent.

Light works affectively – it moves us, works on our emotions and sensitivities. It facilitates action, promotes invention. Light is not a ground but an indeterminate suspension – a groundlessness. Light is not necessarily clarity, nor a false clarity, but a viscous puddle of see through nothingness. God embodies light, not an empty light, a light of nothingness but rather a light which is actual light. A light that is enacted in the continuing creation. Creation, like crucifixion, is an irreversible act; and act of self negation whereby light is a formless gift of grace, an original act of *kenosis*. In the creation of light is the creation of our redemption embodying the total otherness of the Godhead.

Human culture is involved in a permanent process of sign making and interpreting. Theology and Art have, at times, concerned themselves greatly over the symbolism and expression of light. In attempting to approach images of light, through an examination of the social and historical conditions from which they emerged, the problem of context arises. In attempting to define context it must be noted that it is a manufactured by- product of an act and is determined by interpretive strategies. The events surrounding the context are just as worthy of examination. “Context, in other words, is the text itself, and thus consists of signs that require interpretation.”⁶⁷ What appears in Art as a definitive statement is the product of interpretation, as the artist cannot isolate the impact of history.

⁶⁷ Bal. M. & Bryson. N. ‘Semiotics and Art History.’ The Art Bulletin 73. 1991. P. 175.

The examination of narrative in visual art has focussed on the way images are able to narrate stories. While narration is primarily a matter of discourse the visual provides some “traffic of meaning from source to destination and back.”⁶⁸ The artist, like the narrator, is able to reveal the visions of the viewer within the focal plane of the painting, or source of the narrative. Signs can be as ordered and discursive within a picture plane as with text. The act of viewing a narrative painting is a dynamic process. The visual movement over the surface corresponds to the cross referencing within a text. This is not an alternative view but an interrelated format whereby the painting may ostensibly depict a posed scene but the narrative elements may deal with our own reaction to it.

An examination of Rembrandt’s painting *The Artist’s Mother as the Biblical Prophetess, Hannah*⁶⁹ reveals a structure where the treatment of the subject’s chair and cloak appear as one substance, coarsely grained as if the actual material was negated or denied authentic textural treatment. She is mantled with a roughly contoured fabric as if she was constructed from clay or some other constituent of the earth’s crust. Any notion of status or of material wealth is immediately denied. She is delineated by a ribbon of white light that lends a minimal detail to her form, which shines from a remote source, yet delicately picks out her and not facets of the background. The roughness of this form relates more to landscape and the notion of a primeval light picking out the chaos of a cloaked form. This is endorsed by the quality of the portrait of the prophetess as part of her face is hidden and what remains is in shadow forcing the viewer to redefine the nature of portraiture.

The woman totally ignores the viewer and her focus is elsewhere; indeed the invitation to gaze at her is completely devoid of any voyeuristic aspect. She is not the subject of the painting. The invitation to the viewer is to follow her gaze and examine the text of Scripture that she pores over. This is the source of light in the canvas, illuminating what features are discernible but flooding her mind and her life with the love of God. Light shines from the text enlightening it and

⁶⁸ Bal & Bryson. P. 203.

⁶⁹ Rembrandt van Rijn. *The Artist's Mother as the Biblical Prophetess Hannah*. 1631. Oil on Canvas. Rijkmuseum, Amsterdam.

Hannah's world, which has become contained in the text. By its light she sees light and through this a form of inverse voyeurism is cast on the viewer who, while not regarding anything improper, is still imbued with the sense of not behaving correctly, of wasting time in the frivolity of gazing idly at paintings while time could be better spent studying, like her, 'the good book.'

While her shadowed features deny us the narrative of her own thoughts what we glean is the rapture of intense study, quiet determination, and the gift of the source of her contentment.

The focal shift of the viewers allows a reaction against the grain; allows elements to be read as negatives as well as positives within the plane. This creates an insight into the visual narrative that is quite distinct from the visual analysis of allusions. What the picture addresses and the ways in which a viewer participates in the depiction is a key area and most relevant within narrative depiction. Light has been treated iconographically, that is, historical precedents were set that dictated its rendition to later artists. By accepting these dictates later artists endorsed the work of predecessors and added, by their allegiance, more weight to the iconographic status of light. This should not be mistaken as a passive acceptance of tradition; rather it should be seen as an active intervention in the development of theory and technique further enhancing the status of the subject.

Similarly "iconographic analysis frequently avoids statements about the meaning of the borrowed motifs."⁷⁰ To utilise motif in art is not the same as borrowing the meaning. Light can be depicted in art in the same traditional way but that rendition may reflect insight, illumination, the divine word, or the glory of creation. Re-using a shaft of light employed in a previous work may well take part of the narrative from a previous painting but its insertion into the new scene may not be an act of contamination rather a new discourse on its use and interpretation.

⁷⁰ Bal & Bryson. P. 207.

The Freedom of Abstraction.

In art questions arise over the issue of whose interests the depiction of light serves. Are such pictures the instruments of persuasion, manipulation, or domination? Behind the art of the Renaissance is the display of power and wealth of Popes and Princes; behind the art of the Reformation is the assertion of the Church's power on earth. The power struggle between light and dark is echoed in the relationship between Art and the Church where the Church held financial power and the artists wielded the creative power of a hidden process revealing apparently divine creations of wonder and light yet concealing the process of creation. The contemporary artists' divergence from Christian Art does not signify a disinterest - "If we ask the question, Does the image of God appear in twentieth century art, the answer would have to be a qualified no.....But if the question is changed to ask, Is the human encounter with God the subject of painting in our century, the answer is decisively yes."⁷¹

Within Modernism is revealed the newly emergent power of social groups and elites, and the cultural Cold War power of America. Light and power exist within the abstract images also just as their Renaissance counterparts. The generated international publicity surrounding them and their cultural endorsement saw them utilised inherently, not as royalty, but as ambassadors, as heralds or servants – not immediately commanding attention but fascinating, seducing or arousing the awareness of those outwith that cultural elite.

It is through the texts of these paintings that we can blend our drive to understand existence, our need to look – to witness to our being, and the desire to resolve the hidden problem, the mystery of creation and the emergence of light; the questions Gauguin posed in his large Tahitian canvas; *'Who are we, Where do we come from, Where are we going?'*

⁷¹Dillenberger. Jane. Image and Spirit in Sacred and Secular Art. Crossroad, New York. 1990. P. 104.

For most of humanity seeing is being and this re-inforcement of our conscious state was made more confusing and difficult by the rise of Modernism and in particular the development of Abstraction.

Abstraction is neither the negation of precise observation nor the mere stylistic process of increasing reduction. What abstraction allows is the definition of limitation and, parallel to this, a truth regarding the qualities of the medium. What must be precise is the clarity and articulation of the vision. Through those aspects we can come to see infinity in the smallest specifics, eternity in the moment. By fixing this distillation only upon the idea itself a discipline is achieved that allows a transfiguration that is both defining and defined by the outcome.

Perspective lent a primacy to painting from the early Renaissance. It at once established a mathematical prowess that raised painting from the level of the artisan craft to that of high art, and provided context for the revealed narrative. Perspective as context was part of a larger context which was centred around the question and answer of depiction. Perspective only had meaning as a section of the whole context it represented, but was never the object, idea or theme itself. Perspective was limited to signifying a single thing – the structure of illusionistic space. While it may have been utilised metaphorically it was never graced with subtlety, double meaning or varying intention as its context was fixed, reserved and conventional, despite the fact that the meaning of the painting was often not the meaning of the perspective. The experience of abstraction was parallel to this. It showed that perspective was not geometric but organic. “To translate is to invent an identical constellation”⁷² where influence on other areas profited from the relationship to the whole narrative. Translation from one painting style to another permitted the re-definition of the space/light equivalences of two canvases. The identity and definition of the information translated acts as a criterion differentiating the two forms of painting. If the work of painting in all its modes is to offer a separate reality it was fully and plainly demonstrated when

⁷²Ricoeur. P. The Rule of Metaphor. Routledge, London. 1977. P. 91.

abstraction deconstructed the acquired, historical limits of figuration and revealed in the territory of this new frontier the breadth of its ordinary scope. It is abstraction that can transfigure the blackness of the abyss into the interior of the mind attuned to the technologies of the current Western order. The viewer then confronts the void “through a visual poetry that transforms desolation into mystery and revelation.”⁷³

Abstraction through its intensity offers the mind the scope and space to see the profundity of the nothing; it allows the darkness to become visible. It is this form of painting that delineates pictorial space, stretches in recession beyond the weave of the canvas, and refuses to be framed by the painting's edge. In the infinity they suggest and invite us to contemplate their text operates, in common with liturgy, as an act of faith. It requires that we withhold articulation, that we restrain our need to reconstruct meaning and order and float in infinity accepting the spontaneous immediacy of our vision. We must suspend the notion that there is nothing there, or mere hints and allegations of figurative elements, and allow contemplation to draw us into the feeling and realisation that the nothing has depth and texture, that it seems to pulsate and flicker, and leads on endlessly to no end but a means to one.

At that frontier there is gained a purity of vision and enlightenment but perceived at a severe cost to the artists themselves. Operating at that level of purity takes the artist to the frontier of reason – a lonely and desperate place for humanity to exist. If the *Logos* is understood as the reason of God, light and reason are what we seek, but dealing with absolute reason may cause absolute breakdown.

“Man's mind is a holy place and a temple of God in which the demons have laid waste the soul through passionate thoughts.”⁷⁴ There are no pathways in the abyss and any meeting with the darkness of God is wholly ‘other’ and totally confusing. Orientation within the void is hazardous; relocation perilous where no light shines, colour does not operate, and the shifting boundaries of texture

⁷³ Jasper. D. *The Sacred Desert*. Blackwell, Oxford. 2004. P. 117.

⁷⁴ Maximus the Confessor. *Selected Writings*. (Trans.) Berthold. G. Paulist Press, New York. 1985. P. 51.

cannot provide a linear framework but “the reward for the labours of virtue is detachment and knowledge.”⁷⁵

⁷⁵Maximus the Confessor. P. 52.

Flatness, Formlessness, and The Desert Fathers.

A creative act can be seen as an act of violence, an act of change, destroying the silence of an empty canvas. The primed, primal surface serenely white and pregnant with possibilities is slashed and stained as the process starts. The Creation from a primal blackness, the eruption of light, and with that, the devastation of colour and contour, texture and form, revealed the contorted mass that served as chaos until the chaos of colour arrived. "Light was at once substance and medium. All things reflected their source, the light that is God and God's emanation."⁷⁶ Darkness, now shrunken, receded into the blackness of oblivion and light, as a force, comes into effect making the dying spasm visible – the Spirit's oscillation generating movement on the surface and a slow upheaval in the interior. Light "spreads around us as an illusion of vacancy"⁷⁷ where the absolute whiteness is as blinding and disorientating as the blackness. The light presents an "absent horizon, lifted away from the ground. The ground and sky now uncertain"⁷⁸ in an intensity of emptiness. A space defined by light which has become "the modality for knowing and experiencing God, with light as the source and form of God's presence."⁷⁹

There has been in recent times a determination to resolve the dominant question of meaning in painting. Examining the canvas for overt or covert messages, values that are enhanced, causes and stances that are denigrated, is an approach that has been emphasised of late by art historians. Parallel to this has always been the question of whose interests are being served by specific paintings. Traditionally this view of art history – seeing the canvas as an aspect of ideological control indicates, by its definition, the power source as an external

⁷⁶Dillenberger. J. *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities*. SCM, London. 1986. P. 40.

⁷⁷Thubron. C. *In Siberia*. Chatto & Windus, London. 1999. P. 113.

⁷⁸Darrieussecq. M. *White*. Faber & Faber, London. 2005. P. 48.

⁷⁹Dillenberger. P. 40.

facet to the image. This tends to ignore an internal proposition that the image itself may dominate the imagination and generate variations on the theme and influence others with its solution to the problem posed.⁸⁰

The treatment of light in Western art suggests that this may be just such a case. While light as a metaphor and symbol has overt Christian significance the rendition of light in painting has never been seen in terms of 'any graven image'; the depiction of light on canvas does not generate a golden calf. Many paintings from the Fifteenth Century onwards were commissioned by the Church and contained obvious scriptural narratives but the imagery produced of light, technically and symbolically, has influenced a series of artists to the present day. Nor is this influence limited to the history of figurative painting – the rendition of light in abstract terms was a major concern of painters in New York in the 1950's. The Post Modern philosophies have extended this notion of the containing influence of imagery where they may indicate to the viewer the terms of their own reality or where a mediated image may come to function as reality instead of representation.

The truth in painting is a textual statement about painting implying that, definitively, the power of painting relates to the notion of restored truth revealed without interruption or disguise. This representation of truth can be seen as a faithful representation but does not manifest truth. It is the presentation of a re-presentation “which not only opens above the gulf but also holds together the opposite edges of it.”⁸¹ If the truth as pictorial representation contains the tension of opposition of meaning as content and form then a series of tensions then exist if art is to distinguish an inner meaning through a series of oppositions related to its production - “interest always relates us to the existence of an object”⁸² and if subjective satisfaction determines aesthetic judgement it must, and can only be, centred on disinterest.

This notion of Derrida's that artwork is 'framed' and characterised by its apartness, the idea that it inhabits an area of anatomy and separation from

⁸⁰For example see Steinberg's *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, Zone Books, New York, 2001.

⁸¹Derrida, J. *The Truth in Painting*. University of Chicago Press. 1987. P. 6.

⁸²Derrida. P. 44.

'extrinsic' concerns allows light to be seen as a typical parergon; light is a phenomenon apart, a unique experience set apart and delineated, yet by its nature impossible to delineate. For Derrida this was defined as a semiosis - a process that cannot be limited within the logic of enclosure; for him there was a frame – but the frame did not exist.

As Jesus went out into the wilderness to pray and be tested by the devil so Antony and the Desert Fathers went deeper and longer into the desert to test themselves through internal and external forces that, in that place, had control and a greater command of the environment than man. The daily life in the wilderness provided a frugal and remote existence that permitted the *askesis* – the ascetic training whereby they could approach the divine.

In a similar way the New York abstract artists of the 1950's and 60's developed the austerity of the studio - “by which we perceive the unperceivable; by which we know the unknowable.”⁸³ Here they concentrated their efforts to approach the totally abstract. This was Derrida's notion of 'the desert in the desert', of pushing beyond the frontier to a place outside reason and rationality to a situation beyond convention and order where the unknowable could become known.

Just as it was the harshness and remoteness of the landscape which formed and defined Anthony's spirituality and being, so in New York the barren desert of the studio within the desert of the city delineated the abstraction and nature of the artists' developments. Where the desert had identified a process of disengagement from the world by emphasising a clear ecological frontier now the studio became the cell in which the abstract painters fought and wrestled with the problems of abstraction, the methodology of a purity of line and colour, and the mechanics of non figurative painting where “the world is won by those who let it go.”⁸⁴ This was no safe haven. The demons of doubt and loneliness, the temptations of the commercial world, and the need to communicate and circulate ideas, were locked inside the studio with them. The studio became a place to be most feared, the place where modern demons were most powerfully encountered.

⁸³ Reinhardt. A. Art as Art. (Rose. B. Ed.) University of California, Berkeley. 1991. P. 90.

⁸⁴ Reinhardt. P. 93.

As Anthony went into the desert's isolation and emerged full of life and vigour so too does the work of Pollock and de Kooning, of Reinhardt and Rothko, emerge from this period as new, idiosyncratic and pure in its abstraction. In Anthony's writings, especially in the *Epistles of Anthony* there is an emphasis on gaining knowledge "which is above all a knowledge of the self, whereby we are saved and thus returned to God."⁸⁵ This too is seen located in the works of the Abstract Expressionists. The refinement of form and depth, the technical accomplishments, the solutions to the problems of scale and abstraction, are aspects seen by Anthony as "intellectual participation" through which we may participate in God and may gain knowledge of the divine by the same process of concentration, subjugation of exterior interests and passions, and a denial of physical and mental hardship. By this *askesis* the mind is trained and cleansed. "The order sought in the desert is a reconfiguration of the disorder of the fallen world of the cities."⁸⁶ This process of understanding their inner selves resonates with the studio art produced by individuals, not a school of thought, that entered into self and there found a freedom from the restless and dislocated narratives of illusionistic figurative painting. They have left the hagiography of painting and entered the *quies magna* of abstraction. The huge silence of Rothko and Newman dominates the rooms they are exhibited in - "this is the utter desert where each monk remains in his cell.....there is a huge silence and a great quiet here."⁸⁷ As David Jasper has argued there is in the 'Lives of the Desert Fathers' a sense that the entire task of describing the trials and privations that the ascetics went through, and the spirituality that they achieved, is beyond the abilities of the writers, similarly in encounters with abstract painting the viewer enters an experience that is immediately outside the limits of visual language and concept. The search for space and light in painting could never be a collective issue but, like the ascetic monks, was "a radical decentering of the self in a perpetual wandering"⁸⁸ within the self and the materials engaged with where light became space and space light in a culture of perspective to the void and back to a new

⁸⁵Jasper. D. *The Sacred Desert*. Blackwell, Oxford. 2004. P. 27.

⁸⁶Jasper. P. 28.

⁸⁷See Jasper P. 40, note 45.

⁸⁸Jasper. P. 36.

visual structure of perspective. “Pollock seemed to step outside of himself, to begin to address issues of artistic authorship and individual style with an amazing acuity and critical distance.”⁸⁹Pollock's own process of self examination, like that of Rothko and Louis, was a journey into the interior which provided a wholly new and immediate world but in the process badly damaged the interior. With the surrender of the individual interior there was created images of light transcending all individuality, beyond all interiority, towards a total and immediate presence. “Whensoever we make our life and deeds better than they were before, we increase the pleasure which we give to God”⁹⁰but contact with the wholly other could produce an absolute interiority unbalancing the individual and leaving them exposed, vulnerable and often seriously damaged.

⁸⁹Kantor. J. 'Signature Styles.' Artforum, October 2006.

⁹⁰St. Athanasius. The Life of Anthony. (Trans.) Budge. E. Kessinger, Whitefish Montana. P. 26.

Chapter Three.

Light is Intrusion.

Intrusion is the act of forcing, interjecting or interposing abruptly or without invitation. It is an act of intromittance, unsought and unasked for and by its nature interrupts a pre-existent state.

Intrusion cuts across vision, interrupts narrative with its own narrative. When light is intrusion it presupposes a previous narrative, one of darkness or shadow – a pre-intruded state which cannot comprehend it. 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (Jn. 1:5) and since the darkness of the void was a total and absolute darkness there is no comprehension of the creation of light as it is totally other; the introduction of an unknown substance which moves, waves and oscillates compared to darkness which, in its totality, simply was. Light is the new creation, unasked for and unsought and the notion of another 'who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness' (1 Cor. 4:5) may emerge as a threat to, and exposure of, privacy and what had been unseen. The reality of light is a perception located behind our eyes. We tend to perceive what we want and need to perceive, and what past experience has indicated we require. We learn only if we relinquish inappropriate perceptions and develop new ones that work for us.

'Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance' (Ps. 90:8). This development is dependent upon seeing another point of view, being under a greater light, but it is often restricted since our perception is based on a language process. We see with our language and standardise and categorise our system of reference personally and definitively

through our experience. Part of the definition of perception relates to how it causes us to act. How we react to sunlight is an individual process related to our perception of its strength, direction and intensity. Whatever we experience we will construct something out of it, include it in our scheme of things, and transmit it as a truth. What we perceive is the product of what we believe to be reality. We see things not as they are but as we see they are. What we can study are the interpretations people have assigned to light and thereby enter into the profound and least visible of realities, that of language.

Light is so ancient it is taken for granted, part of the created order of the world, natural and therefore considered, like the ozone layer, only in our sense of denial. All light is a metaphor to one degree or another. The word is not the thing, whatever we say light is, it is not. The word implies a static meaning, codified in a system of polarised categories that do not seem to represent what happens when we interact with light. Switching on the light is something we do in a very narrow sense. We make the reality we perceive rather than receive or reflect on it. Painting allows us to receive in a different way, permits a static situation that offers a reflective stance, and admits us to the possibility of moving beyond the image to a greater perception.

From the Decalogue there is in Western tradition that which maintains that image making is not a permissible way of representing holiness; that mimesis is incompatible with revelation.

While there is a great gulf between mimetic traditions and conventions, and the numinous, unknown character of God, the nature of humanity in its desire to strive towards the divine, the attempts of artists to offer us contemplative depictions, and the need to experiment, state in different ways and move towards a vision that we in turn can move beyond.

In this metaphorical geography the only guide we have across the dark rubble of theology is in our “faith seeking understanding”. Our sole methodical chart to the unknown wilderness where we seek to understand and interpret the truth of revelation is in contemplating the efforts of those artists who have approached

these areas of mystery. Art, like theology, is always seeking, and never reaches conclusions, answers or definitive insights but in some considered avenues of approach may offer a clearer image of our relationship with the divine. In some instances the glass shines less darkly but it does not concern itself with any theophany, rather these paintings are all pieces of the one great chart that may lead us to a fuller understanding of the nature of our existence.

Caspar David Friedrich: *Woman at the Window*.⁹¹

With Friedrich's *Woman at the Window* we are presented, ostensibly, with an interior where a woman works before the light, below a domestic image of the cross. Her back towards us, blended to the colour and tone of her surroundings, acts almost as an iconostasis. In that recognition the eastward facing person assumes an officiating role and the intrusion of light can be seen as sacramental. She can be seen as celebrating light as action, a pure force. The suggestion of involvement with a liturgy of light as a kenotic force penetrating, not flooding, the life of the world “seeking the promise of a new creation, given, yet still to come.”⁹² The light of intrusion bathes us; it does not drench or soak, but cleanses and raises questions from the simplest of scenes that inquire as to meaning and set us on a path of examining the apparent truths presented to us.

The woman, who appears to be the subject of this painting, is rendered subtly anonymous, camouflaged in the interior of her Spartan kitchen; her clothing the same colour and texture, and painted in the same manner as the woodwork that surrounds her. In our inability to see her face we are held at the threshold of the room, looking across the space to her back. The interior gives no information as to wealth or status, her activity or the process she has been involved with. The space acts as a barrier, a void we cannot cross; it provides no clues as to the nature of her being or the reason why we are here.

This example of a *Rückenfigur*, a figure with their back to the viewer “dominates the natural scene with their presence.”⁹³ They are not marginal figures included for the sake of human interest. They provoke a particular reaction and convey a specific message. As we hover at the entrance to the room we become aware of the voyeurism we have become trapped in. We become aware of the half

⁹¹Caspar David Friedrich: *Woman at the Window* Oil on Canvas. 44 x 37 cms. 1822. National Gallery, Berlin.

⁹²Liturgy of the SEC, Eucharistic Prayer II – Anticipation.

⁹³Koerner. J. Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape. Reaktion, London. 1995. P. 163.

memory, an element of déjà vu that confuses and comforts us. Ultimately we know nothing of this woman or her activities but she can guide us past the gulfs of silence and the unsaid to allow us to bridge these chasms with our own context. This capacity to lead us and reveal an inner truth of text or vision places them as a stranger on the road to Emmaus where it is their message that is important not they themselves. What she desires is our considered, loving response to the problems that beset us, not our companionship. She will always be in front of us, always vaguely recognisable, always gently pausing and allowing us to articulate the aspect that has eluded us.

She is inherently of this room, part of the fabric of existence and we have to approach her to realise the view beyond that absorbs her gaze. She is not in the way but is 'the way' to the view that “extends over the River Elbe to the opposite shore which symbolises paradise.”⁹⁴The dull, close interior, sparse and uninteresting, represents our ordinary world but beyond where the cross panes above her become a heavily Christianised symbol is the source of light and we are drawn to the external.

The theomimetic is indicated by the light not seen by us, a view she has beyond our own, that only she can interpret. The intrusion is suggested, not forced, and the viewer is drawn to that vision of 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Hebs. 11:1). The window is backlit enhancing the dramatic effect and creates a dematerialised space beyond “punctuated only by boat masts and a row of poplars.”⁹⁵The boats may indicate the passage across the river – the movement from life to death – and this notion can be endorsed by the poplars on the far bank which hold an ancient symbolism relating to the underworld, suffering and sacrifice.

Through Friedrich's treatment “the ordinary, the commonplace, and the familiar collapsed into mysterious particles”⁹⁶of an inner vision. This is not the high colour and passionate expression of Romanticism, Friedrich's work stands alone in its representation of psychological depth and penetrating mood. His

⁹⁴Vaughan. W., Borsch-Supan. H. & Neidhardt. H. Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840. The Tate Gallery, London. 1972. P. 77.

⁹⁵Sala. C. Caspar David Friedrich - The Spirit of Romantic Painting. Terrail, Paris. 1994. P. 193.

⁹⁶Grewe. C. 'Heaven on Earth' Artforum, May 2006. P. 133.

Ruckenfigur paintings are cool, precise and tranquil. The infinity that intrudes into his scenes is co-existent with his exactly rendered serenity which serves primarily to enhance the feeling of alienation. The intrusion they project is “an unfulfilled yearning for a complete fusion with nature, a longing for a totality always absent in the present.”⁹⁷ The intrusive offer of transcendence and salvation, that seems elusive, oscillates between anxiety and despair, and comfort and conciliation.

We are drawn increasingly to the vision of the infinite within the image but are held by the narrative constantly about to unfold in the kitchen, or perhaps more accurately, just ended, as the gloom of the kitchen contrasts with the light beyond. It is as if the woman and her world act as a kind of iconostasis screening us from the theomimetic beyond. This elicits in us the notion of our own lateness, the loss of contact within ourselves and the Godhead. In the *Ruckenfigur's* evocation of desire and anxiety we acknowledge that, alongside the wish to share the panorama and that aspect of theomimesis that holds her spellbound, we also want to see her face and its encouraging security.

Yet it is the *Ruckenfigur* that saves us, holding us in check, making us question our preparedness. The sight of her face would turn the picture inside out. The stare of the *Ruckenfigur* would reflect our own voyeurism, cast an evil eye on us, or like Lot's wife or the gaze of the Medusa reduce us to part of the painting. She is not aware of our gaze, has no sense of exposure. She has assumed the responsibility of that vision for us and reads to us the awesomeness of infinity, that “we are neither the centre nor the origin of our vision, and that what we see has already been formed by a gaze prior to our act of seeing.”⁹⁸ The *Ruckenfigur* looks out to the glory of God, to the infinity of theomimesis for us as, though it is where we think we want to be, it allows us time to reflect on the nature of our involvement with the infinite and the complexity of our being.

What Friedrich achieves in this instance is a deconstruction of theology. Irrespective of Hegel's notion of “the simple, pure totality of the ideal” that

⁹⁷Grewe. P. 133.

⁹⁸Koerner. P. 239/240.

“very essence of spirit”⁹⁹ that he saw as *Dasein*, operating in a union of existence and spirit, or Friedrich's involvement with Romanticism which was seen as an absolute internalisation: “spiritual subjectivity, or conscious personality, as comprehension of its own independence and freedom,”¹⁰⁰ what operates here is light as an intrusive code and the offering of a hermeneutic whereby the code may be deciphered. Friedrich involves us in a hermeneutical circle where we can examine the historical context of the work and determine what it is about, but the canvas modifies questions put to it, challenges expectations and radically alters our vision to bring other areas into view to the extent that the priority of the message goes beyond the artist's original intentions.

⁹⁹Hegel. G. The Philosophy of Art. Trans. Bryant. W. Appleton, New York. 1879. P. 84.

¹⁰⁰Hegel. P. 85.

Jan Vermeer: *Woman Holding A Balance*.¹⁰¹

In the Friedrich it is we, as viewers who are intruding into this domestic scene, caught in an act of voyeurism that increases in intensity. In Vermeer's painting the darkened privacy of the woman's room renders light as an intrusion highlighting objects of concern, if not desire, and highlighting too the reason for her concern.

Here our unrelatedness assumes a furtive aspect as we are involved in a more direct gaze and ourselves provoke an inelegant misconnection. This is the movement from the focalisation of the spectator to the study of the erotic voyeur. This is the gap between David seeing Bathsheba and the acknowledgement that she was beautiful (2 Sam.11:2). It is also the movement from observation to infatuation that dominates the opening section of Susanna and the Elders. Thus Vermeer's scene is not a fixed narrative of a woman considering pearls. Light flows through the gaps of the scene and takes us with it to consider and reconsider our options as the woman, like Susanna, is fixed and has little option. It is the viewer in their assessment of the situation that references options and accesses a higher law. It is they who have a privileged access where “the metaphorical status of the sign is replaced by a metonymic one.”¹⁰² In making their judgement of the scene the viewer is in turn judged as to their judgement and the intrusion of viewing is held in question over the intrusion of light which merely facilitated the human action.

A woman in a blue outfit edged with fur is about to assess the weight of pearls in a hand balance. The scene is lit by a stained glass window in the upper left area that effects a diagonal, widening light reflecting off the pearls on the table, illuminating a depiction of the Last Judgement on the back wall, and bathing her in softness and subtlety. Bal feels this work “avoids narrative, both anecdotal and

¹⁰¹ Vermeer. ‘Woman Holding a Balance’ 1664. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

¹⁰² Bal. M. Reading Rembrandt. CUP. 1991. P. 165.

dynamic”¹⁰³but the narrative lies in the parallel between the Last Judgement and the woman weighing or judging pearls. The contrast is between “spiritual and material values” and echoes a sub genre begun by Bruegel a hundred years earlier in his proverb paintings. The utilisation and depiction of proverbs as an expression of the true character of the Flemish people; *The Big Fish Eat The Little Fish* of 1557 and *The Blind Leading The Blind* of 1568 may find a resonance in Vermeer’s notion of ‘Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged.’

It is the light that disseminates this painting and illuminates the narrative. Light here is a smooth, soft flood, a very gentle intrusion that washes diagonally over the woman and also indicates and magnifies the gaze of the viewer. It is the quality of light that allies realism and description. “The light barely skims the painted surface, inscribing details and darkness into image.”¹⁰⁴ Darkness itself becomes visible and what is lightened is enlightening. As light floods the woman the two furred edges of her jacket are parted by a rim of orange drapery, from a dress that is otherwise entirely in shadow, endorsing her pregnancy as a positive element in the narrative. Is this in turn a continued element in judgement? What is being weighed in the balance here?

It may be that, despite her central position, the woman is an intermediary involved in the act of balancing only, as her scales are empty. Since Vermeer’s light creates the bright orange slice of colour covering her womb it could be argued that, metonymically speaking, it represents the opening of her womb and the Madonna, in her blue jacket, re-distributes the judgement between God and Man. “She may become Mary for those who pursue the interpretive game even further.”¹⁰⁵

The light across the back wall bathes two small oddities. Near the edge of the painting of *The Last Judgement* is a nail and next to the nail is a hole in the wall. These are so minutely detailed that the shadow cast by the nail and within the nail hole are clearly visible. Does this merely enhance the quality of realism in Vermeer’s painting or does the light reveal a final area of balance?

¹⁰³ Bal. M. *Looking In. The Art of Viewing*. G+B Arts International, Amsterdam. 2001. P. 65.

¹⁰⁴ Bal. P. 70.

¹⁰⁵ Bal. P. 73.

The rendered detail of these otherwise pointless aspects are inscribed with meaning, illuminated clearly, but there meaning is not obvious. With any composition the balance of the shapes and forms within it is of key importance. The light reveals; it reveals the imbalances and incoherent details that must be drawn from the margins of this painting if the subject is to be understood. Light reflects off the pearls near the balance but what is to be weighed? This is not an aspect of allegory; there is no balance in the contrast of a woman counting the value of her jewellery, symbolising vanity, and the accounting of souls in the male world of spirituality. Nor is this scene purely anecdotal as this is hardly a genre piece dealing with a scene from daily life. Centred on the woman and her activity it is the emptiness of the scales that tips the balance of priorities and questions appear over the values on display. Light picks out the pearls of the secular and dims the sacred scene in the background. Light highlights the woman's pregnancy in a warmth and richness that absorbs light but leaves the pearls as cold objects merely reflecting light. Values are being tested in a non-cynical way whereby the viewer is asked what the values are in this life, not what they cost. This is light as a parabolic device and as the light infiltrates the room it too is provisional, moving on in the day to cast different shadows, illuminate other areas, and the balance changes. Light is shed on the richness of life, the riches of life, and what may enrich life.

The nail and the nail hole are deliberate clues as to the artist's attempts to effect balance in this work, to realign the forms in the room to their optimum structure. The difficulties inherent in the art of balancing flood this painting alongside the soft light that illuminates it. "It is the light that decentred the image"¹⁰⁶ and causes the viewer to scan across the surface for clues as to its narrative. It is this state of expectancy which is the perfect balance. Like the empty scales, there is nothing to weigh, as yet.

This is light as used tactically, outside illuminating the objects depicted and inside constituting the very visibility of them. It is at once a marginal aspect and

¹⁰⁶ Bal. P. 78.

yet centrally important. Light drapes the interior, gently enfolding all the objects in the room in the same way that light falling on the womb indicates a new light for the world.

The light filling this picture is furthered in its strategy by its softness. It coaxes the viewer to examine more fully and in doing so illuminates the viewer's face and their motives. Identification within the canvas is not imposed on the viewer but we, as viewers, are offered insight and the possibility of self-identification through an awareness and acknowledgement of the process we have employed and are exposed by.

Light as intrusion functions in a parabolic way in that it is provocative, leads to an alternative state of awareness, questions values we hold, draws us into a voyeuristic stance and demands that a decision is made whereby we in turn are judged. What is illuminated is not necessarily the focus of attention. What is under scrutiny, and essentially under judgement, is the stance and attitude of the viewer who is drawn into the visual narrative and demands definitive and determinate information of the scene before them. The loose elements of the scene are structured by their focalisation, which is independent of the artist, and rendered into a narrative suitable to the individual and in that judgement of the scene and its contents lurks the apocalyptic insight, which may change their attitudes, but will certainly act as a judgement on them.

Mathis Grünewald: The *Crucifixion* from the *Isenheim Altarpiece*.¹⁰⁷

Whereas in the work of Friedrich and Vermeer light, through its intrusion, allows us to read, and read into, the pictures as we wish, the artistic work of the German Reformation period would allow no such personalised interpretation. As Israel followed a pillar of fire by night that intruded into the desert as an indicator of direction (Ex. 13:21-22) so Protestant Theology came to rely on the diagrammatic indication in Art rather than risk idolatry. Text became an inclusion within the pictorial, indication was preferred to depiction, and composition became focussed less on the picture to be interpreted and emerged as an interpretation of a picture. Religious painting was meant to train our eyes to see beyond the image, to nullify the scene without obliterating it. The Protestantism that developed in 16th Century Germany was iconoclastic but in its austerity the image persisted and what was achieved was a reformation of the images they replaced. The force of their negation of the image was such that it renewed the image; it was displayed by its negation. The notion of denial was central to Christianity and to “aim the hammer at the crucifix is to reiterate the gestures that made it.”¹⁰⁸

The central panel of Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* depicts the Crucifixion and introduces a double intrusion into the narrative: The inclusion of the baptist after the event, and the intrusion/protrusion of the Baptist's indicating/admonishing finger. Half the panel conforms to the norm; John the Baptist dominates the entire right side of the front panel.

John is the light intruding into the Crucifixion in the sense that he is out of time and context, and was the fulfilment of the prophecy and initiated the 'new' testament. John is the new Elijah in his risen form whereas Christ still suffers on the cross. It was towards John that all the prophesies of the prophets and of the law were leading (Mt. 11:13). He bridges the gap between the old and new

¹⁰⁷The *Crucifixion* from the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1515, Matthias Grunewald. Musee Unterlinden, Colmar.

¹⁰⁸Koerner, J. The Reformation of the Image. Reaktion, London. 2004. P. 13.

testaments as a mediator between Moses and Christ. The Baptist emerges from history as the preacher and symbol of salvation through Christ. It is he that shed the initial light on Jesus' role and maintains this in the painting where his pointing finger and open text intrude into this scene of scandal and sacrifice indicating the lamb of God who has taken on the sins of the world to the extent that his body bears the corruption of them.

The inherent risk of intrusion is that the intruder, or object of intrusion, becomes more central than the subject of the piece. In the act of indication the Baptist assumes an active role in the painting compared to the inert Christ whose act of kenosis is complete yet is not active in the world. The figure of the Baptist dominates the right side of the panel and while he may signify his office and not his person it is he who is active in the scene, he who, in a sense, controls the mood and message of the piece. While “the pointing finger maps the referential displacement from the signifier to the signified”¹⁰⁹ it is the dominant sign in the picture, indicating Christ, but its intrusion yields more information than mere indication.

This aspect was central to the great Protestant argument of whether faith was an inward illumination or whether the outward signs of sacramental ministry were required. John's pointing finger indicates that external aspects of faith are vital. John himself was cited by Luther as the external word and testament who was our model. Christ is the true light but the darkness cannot comprehend it and it shines unseen in the world until the Baptist's finger indicates it and we receive faith when all is illuminated. If his finger is ignored all will remain in darkness including those who believe that faith is their own inner light. No-one is in shadow, no-one is fully lit within the painting so the intrusion, while symbolic, has a status on a par, if not greater than, those actually taking part in the passion. The intrusion is light to lighten our darkness, authenticated by Scripture, which he holds before us, but structured as to cause concern as Christ is visible in a light no different from the others. Ultimately across the face of this scene the Baptist's outstretched finger directs us to the representation that stands apart. Christ is indicated rather than indicating. Christ on the cross denotes the

¹⁰⁹Koerner. P. 194.

significance of the indication, the message that the crucifixion came to transmit, that it is Christ that intrudes into our lives.

For many Northern European states involved in the Reformation, but especially Germany, religious painting became an intrusion, a light that had failed, a light that had to be controlled or delineated. “The Reformation shaped what the visual image is”¹¹⁰ and Luther cited only four subjects whose images could help the understanding of the Gospel: the Baptist pointing, the risen Christ crushing death and the Devil, the Paschal Lamb with a victory banner, and the crucifix.

What these images held in common was the fact that they were at once unimaginable, and self evident symbols of something more. The Reformation limit on images sought to deny any movement from image to meaning, and further sought to deny complex scenes which were deemed as unreliable. This set interpretation as important or necessary and had the potential to contradict the faith that was being striven for. Church art and paintings were only acceptable if they were “not representations of reality, but mere indications of what cannot be represented.”¹¹¹ Any other option increased interpretive excess and expanded the role of the thinking individual, increasing the potential for further division.

Thereafter in Northern Europe the role of painting was turned from expression to what was assumed to be a non intrusive diagrammatic function. The obscurity or indeterminacy of painting, at an intellectual level, was a strength free to connote more to the viewer where the significance of the image suggested a reality alternative to the preached one. The depiction of the light of the Gospel was seen as a claim about how events are and invited contemplation that promoted art into an area greater than itself. “By engaging us in an unforeseen pattern of coherence or integrity art uncovers relations and resonances in the field of perception that 'ordinary' seeing and experiencing obscure or even deny.”¹¹² The facility of Art to alter a given perception, to affect a change in attitude, and fortify a reality removed from the artist's conception was an intrusion too far and had to be

¹¹⁰Koerner. P. 246.

¹¹¹Koerner. P. 248.

¹¹²Williams. R. Grace and Necessity. Morehouse/Continuum, London. 2005. P. 37.

controlled by the Church's dictates. The encroachment of a dimension where objects and scenes could reveal more than they depicted and permitted a level of interpretation that went beyond the original meaning of the text in its historical context, bearing an expression that reflected the then contemporary issues was wholly outside the scope of what was determined around them and vied with the energy and activity of a Reformation that was determined to succeed.

Any religious painting is an exemplification of the word, illuminating, like light, the word in a way that text cannot. Protestant Art in Germany incurred a slippage in the depicted. In their attempted control of the image they flattened space to produce a more narrative style, they included text within the depicted scene to explain the visualisation, and they introduced a diagrammatic use of gesture and gaze in an effort to direct the minds of the congregation towards central themes of the Protestant movement and avoid the open interpretation that was possible with a generally depicted scene from the Gospel.

In the furtherance of this images of these central messages were intruded into scenes outwith the general context of those scenes in an endeavour to concentrate the minds of the people within the narrow confines of the new doctrine. The predella of the *Wittenberg Altarpiece* illustrates this clearly, and many of the other aspects mentioned are included in panels from the altarpiece.¹¹³ Here Luther preaches to a congregation in the flattened, narrow enclosure of a courtyard on the Crucifixion, pointing to the crucified figure of Christ who is apparently present between Luther and the congregation. This kind of visual analogy is highly dubious as “analogies are traced best by a person who can take hold of a basic similarity of character in the items he compares.”¹¹⁴ The similarities the Church authorities wanted to stress were not clarified by this method of intrusion and what evolved was a legacy of rote learning that opposed the inner voice and feelings of the public.

To see means to see in relation; and the relations actually encountered in percepts are never simple. The appearance of any aspect in our visual awareness depends on its place and function within the totality of our visual memory and is modified

¹¹³Lucas Cranach the Elder. *Wittenberg Altarpiece*. 1547. Oil on Panels. Stadtkirche, Wittenberg.

¹¹⁴Arnheim. R. Visual Thinking. University of California Press, Berkeley. 1997. P. 79.

by that influence. If a visual entity is removed from its context it becomes a different object. Theology as a two dimensional process demonstrated the incapacity of the image to be held in check, and was an intrusive aspect of Reformation Art. Painting, as a display of three dimensional thinking, reveals what we see in terms of status and context, but has also the property to suggest change, and as change shunts meaning to and fro so also are the metaphors contained in painting.

What was determined was that light took over, deconstructing the visual narratives, allowing a re-interpretation of the depicted scenes. Light came to act as depth in the two dimensional, diagrammatic representations produced after Grunewald. Light indicated the different creative concept and similarly allowed observers to draw conclusions about that society's attitudes towards life and religion, and their psychological implications. In their flattening of space they flattened light; there is no dramatisation of shadow or bold colour and the effect is that neither life nor the depicted atmosphere is real. If negative space and unreality were the messages produced from the Art of the Church at that time it can be appreciated how long it took for Painting to re-emerge as a major cultural force and to restart its exploration of light.

Light as a Subversive Process.

Subversion from an anthropological perspective sees light as causing the overthrow of the previous state, introducing a new culture, being a new culture and, at the same time, not being part of it.

Light oversees, lightens and makes public activities, facilitates rituals, reveals the fears and conceits. It is of the world but not in it. It reveals reality, becomes part of it yet remains outwith its control. What appears as natural can be seen as control; what has been adopted as convention may be an aspect of victimisation or indoctrination as “for most people, the acceptance of a particular doctrine is largely attributable to the accident of birth.”¹¹⁵

What we accept as truth is shaped by the symbols and symbol manipulation of the culture we are born into. Most of humanity respond to a set of verbal abstractions which they sense provide them with an ideological identity. Light, however, shines beyond life to a cosmos of unknown dimensions and conceals a process that we are only coming to terms with. Faith should be an openness, an act of truth in the unknown light; it should not be bound to ideological dogma. Light intrudes as an apocalyptic new environment; an absolute and totally new environment subverting the darkness of the void. The apocalyptic cannot be reversed but the light must be considered with a view towards its impact on us. Our faith is an willingness to contemplate what is happening to us; to acknowledge that light blinds and burns, adversely affects our environment, can cause skin cancer, heats and comforts, nurtures and ripens our world. We do not contemplate what is happening in light, or what changes its lack would enforce. Our increasing technological capacity in electronics only creates more light with less significance. The advent of technological production is a controlling factor in our lives; it has changed our lives, but that is not a new phenomenon, what is significant in the intrusion of light is the degree of change. With the apocalyptic intrusion of light in the world change changed.

¹¹⁵Postman. N. & Weingartner. C. Teaching as a Subversive Activity. Penguin, Harmondsworth.1973. P. 17.

There occurs a bureaucracy of light, an institution resistant to change since it asks 'how' and not 'why'? It is concerned with the ideas and metaphors of light but not with its values and information. This is establishment, the counter subversion of attitudes that could drag us back to the chaos of a neon lit void. It concentrates on the need and desire for light but not the structure and process of light nor how it can manipulate our senses and attitudes. Light is so laden with preconceptions that it is practically impossible to introduce an idea that does not fit into traditional categories. Mankind's mimetic light is a conspiracy of emptiness ridiculed in its ambition to illuminate the world. The initial light was "that extravagant brightness lacking in the liquid greyness of our days."¹¹⁶ It is not what light does that is ultimately important but what it is in its apocalyptic totality that we must consider. Questions of content, size, duration and strength will only supply us facts whose definitions will shift in time as light itself shifts, subverting norms and disallowing us to see things as they were.

Intrusion may subvert a long established culture where questions of ethnicity may change the colour of the map and effect a transculturation process. Just as Eurocentrism occluded Africa in the 19th Century, introducing an alien culture and sublimating the indigenous notion of creativity, it can be seen as a global affect of "worldwide domination by a metaculture, and based on a traumatic transformation of the world"¹¹⁷ to the extent that elements of the metaculture cease to be ethnic and become internationalised, merely intrinsic components of a culture determined by Western development. Light as imperialism was an absolute expansion throughout the cosmos imposing change and causing the downfall of the previous structure. Imperialism is about controlling geographical space in a relationship based on subordination and domination, suppressing one state of being and promoting a new 'universal' standard. The parallels between the prophetic tradition in the Bible and light as a force that takes over a world are seen in the absolute darkness of the abyss which is overthrown and subverted by light creating a dependent periphery of night which is no longer black but what

¹¹⁶Bonnefoy. Y. On the Motion and Immobility of Douve. Bloodaxe, Newcastle upon Tyne. 1992. Quoted by Mathews. T. P. 19.

¹¹⁷Mosquera. G. 'The Marco Polo Syndrome. Some Problems Around Art and Eurocentrism.' Kocur & Leung (Eds) Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985. Blackwell, Oxford. 2006. P. 219.

has become known and accepted as dark. This is a total and apocalyptic destabilisation by light. The radical altering of a state of being and the introduction of a new totality sabotaging chaos and affecting all levels of consciousness and ultimately all aspects of society. The colonial hermeneutic infers that invaders are liberators; “that the conquest of Canaan is the biblical paradigm that epitomises the invasion”¹¹⁸ of the world by light. The sacred texts are employed to justify war and slavery, exploitation and theft, but their manipulation is inconsistent with the notion of a God of love.

We use light to 'lighten our darkness' in the domestic sense of our homes and workplaces but do we 'see' that light that will lighten the darkness of our ignorance? The Western perception of reality leads us to regard what is there, the seen, the proven, the actuality of our surroundings, whereas other cultures have concentrated on seeing what was not there. The relationship of humanity to its environment presents radically different perceptions in different cultures. The notion of the totemic relationships between species, the idea of a relationship with an ongoing creation provides many indigenous peoples with a ritual of re-creation that lives and affects their lives. In the West we are left with the residue of recreation where we attempt to fill a gap in our existence.

In the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime the Ancestors sang the geography and geology of their land into being. The land and the light existed as a concept which was sung into being in order to exist. To exist, for that culture, is to be perceived. Light and form have relevance, history and relationship in a shared existence that motivates and sustains the people. In the intrusion of colonisation the perceived gain was land and mineral wealth; what was lost was our sense of the hiddenness of God in the light and wonder of creation.

Does the effect of light dominate or liberate? Are we poorer or discriminated against, oppressed or voiceless in the face of light? From the perspective of the oppressed and excluded there invariably arises a principle of re-orientation with a view to be all inclusive, just, unbiased and fair. The followers of Zapata, the indigenous Mexican revolutionary movement worked under the slogan: 'Towards

¹¹⁸Tamez. E. 'The Hermeneutical Leap of Today.' *Semeia* 75, 1996. P. 203.

a world where many worlds fit.' This is not a reassertion of old or ethnic values but a transverse shift to include all possible worlds and the endless relationships that are formed. Absolute light allows us to assume the complexity of the contexts, subjects and discourses we encounter. It further permits the emergence of the unknown, the unvoiced and the excluded in the widest possible sense.

The Intrusion of Narrativity.

The issue of narrative interpretation is relevant since the paintings discussed contain only partial aspects of the elements which traditionally are seen as signs of narrativity. They are about single characters where any interaction is minimal, internal and connected to light and space. In the case of Grunewald's *Crucifixion* the Baptist dominates half of the painted surface and his symbolic role is indicative of the narrative, but not part of the original narrative. He is an intrusion breaking the narrative.

The figures are not dramatically charged; they do not engage with us or adopt postures that indicate action or desire. While private genre pieces they are not intimate scenes and the level of voyeurism attached to them is very low. They are single paintings of specific subjects not part of a series and while both Vermeer and Friedrich painted similar topics, in their own field, they did not paint sequels but operated within a genre. The viewer is never asked to postulate a coherent development in time between the scenes or characters. What is represented does not implicate a sequence of events ; there is no movement of time, space or light inherent in them. Paint handling can imply a narrative quality but the painters have not indicated any movement, there is no flourish or flounce, no swirl of fabric or flutter of drapery and their paint handling endorses this.

Movement is an aspect of time, indicates a sequence of events, and is crucial to narrative; “without movement in time there is no narrative.”¹¹⁹

The artists have not stimulated the viewer towards a narrative reading. The confusion towards narrativity comes from the viewer who demands complementary information; historical knowledge, a sense of personal or historical plot, fictional, imaginative, biographic knowledge, or aspects of the artist's life reflected in the painting. While the figures are alone and quietly intent on their own thoughts and actions it is the viewer then who takes the raw information of the scene and composes the narrative they desire. The individual response to a scene is a form of homage, as we search for clues we become lost

¹¹⁹Van Alphen. P. 24.

in our own quest, our own narrative that becomes fixated on what we cannot have, what we cannot know.

This is narrative process as sensation. An intrusion into our own narrative engineered by our sense of a pre-existent story which is self-transferable and individual as it centres on the process of narrative not its structures.

Unrepeatable, non-iterative, it does not take place but happens within the viewer as an aspect of characterisation. This does not rely on the figure nor the ideal, only space that can be related to, known, and adopted into the personal process. These paintings do not leave us isolated in space nor hindered by a notion of voyeurism but invite us to look and enter without embarrassment. There is never a clear interaction between the viewer and the viewed subject, what arises is an interest, a desire embedded in the event that provokes the viewers interest, unexplained but half remembered like the onset of *deja vu*.

It is the intrusion of light that may act as a rule for us. A rule similar to that of the monastic order that prevailed in the desert, that “stood between them and the horrors of limitless responsibility and repentance.”¹²⁰ Through the intrusion of light the divine seems to condense allowing the infinite briefly to appear calculable. Light maintains a tension between representation or testament to the nature of the divine and the temptation to idolatry inherent in the narrative of representation. It is light that allows the movement to some form of abstraction, to form what Derrida refers to as the 'desert in the desert', where in its intruded state, beyond rationality and knowledge, it may allow the experience of the sacred. Light's absolute intrusion creating uncertainty and disorientation, like the desert experience, prepares an opportunity for insight into the ineffable calculation or concern for the rules. It is the intrusion of light that creates that “desert of undecidability where one is faced with the radical contingency of one's self”¹²¹ and the absolute clarity of light that dominates every decision or act

¹²⁰Branch. L. 'The Desert in the Desert: Faith and the Aporias of Law and Knowledge in Derrida and *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.' The Journal of the American Academy of Religion. Vol. 71. 2003. P. 812.

¹²¹Branch. P. 816.

relating to that self, where the knowledge may be gained that the secret of the rule is its nothingness – its freedom in infinity.

Intrusion gravitates towards a terrible silence. An empty silence in the interstices of our knowledge. Caught in the action of intrusion we chase the echo but miss the reflection, fearful of missing the main area of concern, the bigger picture hidden by intentions among suggestions of narrative.

Intrusion offers us words but no language and this links it to the work of the Desert Fathers. In the untamed, the wilderness they found no words – a language of signs and symbols, of heat and light, a speech of rock and sand, but not of words. Here intrusion became more than interruption and distraction, it possessed its own narrative quality and while it may through self reflection provide insight and revelation it is also held in tension, as this “narrative seems to be the natural enemy of vision; it blinds.”¹²²

It is association that connects and ultimately binds. Items become connected when they resemble each other, or when they frequently appear together, or when authority links them together - “to see means to see in relation.”¹²³ Burning bushes are now immediately linked to God's contact with Moses (Ex.3:2) but in this intrusion was the closure of a narrative and the formation of a new one. The desert herdsman's life was over and intrusion was not disruption or dislocation but reformation and redirection. “That light teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light.”¹²⁴

Intrusion may grant a fuller knowledge that beyond our perception and contemplation there is a transcendent essence that formed the cosmos and on which everything depends. Reason defines intrusion but “the apprehension of it is the knowledge of truth.”¹²⁵

Intrusion does cut across vision, interrupts narrative with its own narrative, but it is in that act of intrusion that we may be made aware. It is within the movement

¹²²Van Alphen. E. Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self. Reaktion, London. 1998. P. 21.

¹²³Arnheim. P. 54.

¹²⁴Gregory of Nyssa. The Life of Moses. Trans. Malherbe. A. & Ferguson. E. Paulist Press, New York. 1978. P. 59.

¹²⁵Gregory of Nyssa. P. 60.

of fire to light, from rod to snake, that we may sense beyond similarities and associations, and isolate the transcendent factor intruding into our awareness.

Chapter Two.

Light is Transfiguration.

Transfiguration, for the Christian, is definitively linked to the episode in Christ's life when, on a mountain – possibly Mount Tabor near Nazareth – he was witnessed radiantly flooded with God's glory (Mt.17:1-9, Mk.9:2-10, Lk.9:28-36, 2Pt.1:16-19.). He was seen in the company of Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, who had both seen God's glory (Ex.24:12-18, 33:7-23, 34:29-35, 1Kgs.19:1-18). If the glory of God was witnessed in the Transfiguration then it can properly be understood as aesthetics, since beauty alongside its decorous, delightful qualities is also concerned with truth and goodness and in those polarised areas may appear disturbing and awesome. It is in the overwhelming beauty of the Transfiguration that truth and integrity are subsumed into the astounding glory of God's love as “truth without love leads in the end to bitterness and cynicism.”¹²⁶ If glory is revealed to us in Jesus' person (Jn. 1:14) it is as a resplendent, majestic radiance manifesting God's presence (Ex.33:18-23) and consummated in his death and resurrection (Jn.17:1, 4-5). It is also apparent in his acts, the signs that he gave throughout his ministry as they were displays of truth and compassion.

Glory allowed the disciples to see Jesus as he really was not as he merely appeared to be. This is such a pronounced alteration in the state of being that it inspires awe. While Jesus' healing miracles change the state of health and the state of being not only to the blind, lame or leper concerned, but also for all those who witnessed those breath taking events. Those amazing changes from damage to wholeness, from brokenness to gathered completeness would appear awesome but the instant of transfiguration is the moment of glory. It is also the instant of recognition, the fulfilling moment of enlightenment and revelation which also

¹²⁶Harries. R. Art and The Beauty of God. Mowbray, London. 1993. P. 50.

includes an aspect of concealment as transfiguration is an aspect of the apocalyptic.

A *transfigured* reality exists when the symbolic and architectural details relate completely to one another; when the symbols utilised may be allegorical but are located perfectly within the landscape or interior to the extent that the symbolism has become inherent in the setting. *Transformation* relies on metamorphosis. The experience of the work is acknowledged in its painterliness and crafted qualities, but this knowledge is external to the experience of the work itself. The viewer is drawn into a metamorphosed space whose identity has dis-located.

Any painting revealing transformative glory cannot rely on the pretty, fashionable or sentimental aspects of art which reflect a form of totalitarianism not love as these are exclusive and elitist, aimed at a passing trend and not at an enduring truth. They beg conformity and deny anything that is individual or distinctive. The transformative painting can be disturbing, harrowing; it must be striven for. It will take the materials of the world and, out of their commonness and deformity, create a change that enables the viewer to perceive beauty. Not the cheap and easy popularity, but the disturbed, worked for, miraculous conjunction of truth and integrity.

In the Transfiguration, and in the light of the Resurrection, Jesus reveals the hidden glory that shines and dazzles, astounds and awes with its truth and eternity. It defamiliarises the image gained from the Gospels; it dislocates the commonness of the man and creates an anamnesis of the divine. It is another aspect of *kenosis*, an instant outpouring of love, a revelation of the divine 'for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Col.1:19). Any painting tackling this subject will retain that profundity, will maintain a perplexing tension filled relationship with the awestruck, questioning viewer whose awareness of the substance before them is overlapped in marvelling at the wonder of infinity facing them as such painting "confronts us in such a way that we cannot be indifferent; we are somehow different as a result."¹²⁷

While language expresses thought they are not the same. There is a gap between that which is expresses and that which is expressed. There is a shared identity but

¹²⁷Dillenberger, J. A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities. SCM, London. 1987. P. 241.

it is also the parabolic and profundity of expression that can reveal and conceal meaning at the same time. Painting is an indirect process of expression since its immediate intention is to communicate the ontological in concepts and images but it can assist a personal direct response to the infinite as the visual deals with the surface but indicates the beyond Painting can translate myth, can translocate the notion of oneness and in that lies its power to express the relationship of humanity to its natural environment and to infinity. To attempt to communicate in a direct way the fundamental relationship of the individual to infinity may necessitate a specific form of stylistic process that may require interpretation. The effective communication of the transfigurative experience is the revelation of a state of being that may well contain elements of tension, conflict or movement but not distinguishable objects. It is dominated by an overall sense of unity; a cosmic continuum whose infinity is at once a sense of recession and one of progression creating a gap between the viewer and the viewed where space appears to open out in front of them but also seems to rush towards them and past them in a flow of eternal motion that is realised in the now of being. Some abstract artists have employed the structural elements of painting as symbols to transcend the everyday, depriving reality of its concrete nature to depict the ultimate sense of the infinite. The notion of sacred presence may appear as sacred absence and be immediately bound to the notion of emptiness, and that void and abyss of the artist's construction. If artistic integrity is lacking all that may appear is distortion and a fascination for the material process that may drag the viewer into negativity without promise or hope. The sense of presence must be positive whereby what is seen in the reality of the present can be transfigured into an anticipation of a perfect future. To be transfigurative the artist's images must clearly affirm the notion of infinity and oneness, must deal with change and exaltation and endorse the sense of elation and rapture inherent in the process.

The transfigurative in art cannot be linked to the promotion of the personal will which makes demands, judges, promises and ultimately appears only as a conduit for the artist's purpose as a declamatory tool. For painting to involve the

transfigurative it must retain an integrity that “opens the eyes to a truth which is lost in the daily-life encounter with reality”¹²⁸ that may facilitate a movement within the gap, and it is within that gap that the transfigurative moment may take place.

The movement towards asceticism by monks removing themselves into the blinding light of the desert and the arduous existence that involved, was, for the monks who took this path, comparable to Christ's ascent of the mountain and was directed at gaining the deepest experience of God which could transform their being. The difficulty of their existence in the desert did not merit the experience as such but their determination to detach themselves from society and the pressures of urban life and culture whereby they might achieve an interiority sufficient to allow God to change their being (2Cor.3:18) could be summed up in an assimilation to God's glory through a process of purification (1Jn.3:2) that would change their appearance and nature.

Throughout the duration of this seclusion there appears no violent storm or meteorological upheaval; there is a process of change but within a still segment of time – 'and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice' (1Kgs.19:12). What is witnessed is a change in both the physical and mental state. The radiance of the exterior and a deep peace inside is reflected to others:

“And we all knew one thing by being there
The space we stood around had been emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that suddenly stood open.
High cries were felled and a pure change happened.”¹²⁹

What we receive is an assurance of things hoped for, a description of what occurred - 'We heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the mountain' (2Pt.1:17).

¹²⁸Tillich. P. 'Art and Ultimate Reality' in Thiessen. G. (Ed) Theological Aesthetics. SCM, London. 2004. P. 214.

¹²⁹Heaney. S. 'Clearances VII' The Haw Lantern.

What happens is a radical alteration of substance affected by a wholly other state; a movement to another degree of being that redefines the notion of chemical and physical change. 'And his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them' (Mk.9:3). The desire for this change led to the experiences of the Desert fathers and as the ascetic monks moved into the desert to seek perfection so they created oases of spirituality and interiority. This could be the *Pratum Spirituale* of John Moschus; the "little parable of flowering fields in spring, and how colour and fragrance alike hold the wayfarer from passing on."¹³⁰ A world of quiet and self control, of fortitude and unceasing patience, where vision and non attachment were sought.

These however, were not easily attained; life in the desert was not a soft option and denial and suffering were the tools employed to gain access to the interior self. "The transfiguration of the unveiled face must be demonstrated in a suffering and struggling transformation which involves changing oneself and existing conditions."¹³¹

In many ways this sentence of Moltmann's sums up the life and times of Jackson Pollock whose endurance at the frontier of Modern Art changed the condition and direction of painting forever at an ultimate cost to himself. Pollock's pursuit of an absolute comment on oneness was not the mere pondering of an aesthetic longing. In his abstract paintings of the late 1940's and early 50's Pollock removed the identity of the time-image concept from painting; that depictional aspect programmed into the history of painting. In his movement to large, abstract canvases which held the constancy and demand of the now, Pollock stemmed the notion of conclusion which was draining painting by dropping the whole idea of image. In avoiding the problems of conclusion he distanced himself from the synthesis of time and space and concentrated on a localised time/space opposition that, far from stagnating, opened a focus on the now of infinity. By dissociating himself from the image in the fractured, open weave of his works he kept faith with the key concepts of painting: colour and illusionistic

¹³⁰Waddell. H. *The Desert Fathers*. Vintage, New York. 1998. P. 173.

¹³¹Moltmann. J. from 'Theology and Joy' in *Theological Aesthetics*, Thiessen. G. (Ed.), SCM, London. 2004. P. 337.

depth, and revealed the internal structure of the work, the textural quality, the open mesh and introduced the dully light reflective quality of industrial and metallic paints which reinforced “the essentially artificial nature of art as well as suggesting space, time and metaphysical levels of meaning.”¹³²

The abstraction of the 1940's did not contain the geometry or Platonic-idealism of abstract art that had ignored, or evaded, the problems of life during the 20's and 30's. The abstract work of the mid 1940's realised fragmentation as a new pictorial device and also utilised light, abstract shapes for their own sake, in their own right, and not because they related back to some de-fabricated aspect of image. Integration had to be total and complete in the merging of materials and form. This transfiguration revealed a new lucidity, balance and order, developed from abstraction, that achieved a stabilising effect on the turbulence of the age. “The embrace had undertones of despair but it came primarily from acceptance and recognition.”¹³³

The extreme spontaneity of handling of the material brought an immediacy of impact of threads of light. The seizure or entrapment of this light fixed and registered it as image transfigured into a unity of oneness. The gap between concept and creation apparently vanished allowing structures to be seen through the exigencies of painting itself which, in turn, revealed an integration of man and materials.

The paintings *One*¹³⁴ and *Lavender Mist*¹³⁵ are softly stained in a low key colour coalescence of subtle tonal variations. These are large, quiet paintings supporting the foreground curvilinear movements in a restricted and subdued range of colours and paint qualities. Here there is none of the frenzy of the later *Blue Poles*¹³⁶ where vivid colour action almost hides the delicacy of the structure. In *One* the paint rests on the surface registering a mood of contained and restrained unity that transfigured modern painting and had a similar effect on the viewer.

¹³²Robertson. B. Jackson Pollock. Thames & Hudson, London. 1960. P. 82.

¹³³Robertson. P. 77.

¹³⁴Pollock. J. *One*. 1950. Oil, Duco, Dev-o-lac and Aluminium paint of canvas. 106 x 209 ins. Private Collection. New York.

¹³⁵Pollock. *Lavender Mist*. 1950. Oil, Enamel and Aluminium paint on canvas. 88 x 119 ins. Private Collection. New York.

¹³⁶Pollock. *Blue Poles: Number 11*. 1952. Oil, Duco and Aluminium paint on canvas. 83 x 192.5 ins. State Collection, Canberra, Australia.

The minor key colour effects an atmospheric quality also found in variation in *Lavender Mist* as opposed to the flamboyantly artificial scheme of *Blue Poles*. This is communication but not in the sense of description. There is an element in these paintings that anticipates the future; that locates the spiritual condition of the viewer and allows them to sight on infinity and the possibility of self transfiguration through oneness and a shimmering unity distilled from a formal sense of being into an undercurrent of existence which was not depicted but synthesised into paint where “the image went to the paint, not the paint to the image.”¹³⁷

Transfiguration can be seen as an aspect of glory and the transformation of the bodily may be seen as a manifestation of that glory. While the transfiguration of Jesus is still a mystery, in that, we are still blinded by its light, it can also be seen as an experience in the life of the Church where “the transfiguration was seen... as the summit of Christian experience of Christ, and the Apostles could provide clues as to the qualities required.”¹³⁸

Parallel to this was the assertion, led by Irenaeus, that “the glory of God is a live human being, and a truly human life is the vision of God”¹³⁹ whereby the light of the Godhead, shining through the humanity of Christ, illuminates mankind also – “the kingdom is inside you and outside you”¹⁴⁰. This unifying property is a central aspect of transfiguration where nothing could be empty or void and all could be changed utterly by Christ who “will transfigure the body of our humiliation, so as to conform it to his own glorious body”(Phil. 3:21).

The radiant light of the Godhead illuminating the being of Jesus allows humanity to experience the light of creation; “it enlightens them in proportion to the perfection they have achieved.”¹⁴¹ If, as Climacus suggests, in a unification of one's senses, the awareness of a universal wholeness, in the achievement of a oneness, the mysteries of existence can be clarified and related to us it will be the

¹³⁷Robertson. P. 11.

¹³⁸Louth. A. *St. John Damascene*. OUP. 2004. P. 234.

¹³⁹Irenaeus. *Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei*. Quoted in Louth P. 234.

¹⁴⁰The Gospel of Thomas 3.

¹⁴¹Climacus. J. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. (Trans.) Luiibheid. C. & Russell. N. Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey. 1982. P. 280.

product of someone “who has conquered the passions has injured the demons”¹⁴² and Pollock's paintings of oneness eliminate the demons of confusion and complexity. His canvases of unity and infinity are not mimetic, rather they stand as form of anaphoresis; they offer us the suspended movement of particles. They reference our previous sense of totality and in referencing the infinity we sense, they acknowledge that beyond and realm of the totally other. “The man who does not know God speaks about him only in probabilities”¹⁴³ but Pollock's references are assured and confident, large and commanding statements about the nature of our being, our source, and final destination. He combines the material and spiritual in offering humanity a demonstration of the dynamics of transfiguration. The value of the transfigurative in painting is not in the fact that it may deal with decorative style or prophetic functions, rather it is in their great capacity to affirm everyday life. It is in their oscillation between the poles of style and function that they encompass our thoughts and fears, hopes and desires, and in their shift from prophetic concerns to affirmative values they can realise our dream and provide a vision of eternity. “Ultimate reality underlies every reality, and it characterises the whole appearing world as non-ultimate, preliminary, transitory and finite.”¹⁴⁴ The transfigurative in art can allow us access to that area of true reality which cannot deceive us.

¹⁴²Climacus. P. 248.

¹⁴³Climacus. P. 288.

¹⁴⁴Tillich. P. 209.

Morris Louis: *The Veils Series*.

Morris Louis may have pursued a related vision of colour and openness displaying an awareness of Pollock and Frankenthaler but he was not under their influence. His is the more resolute advance because his is not a derived vision. Louis did not settle for three colour paintings of inter-related planes but created soft meadows of colour hugging a shallow field of depth that were quite unique. His work still remains impressively visual, powerfully dominating the space it occupies, and mesmerising the individual viewer as the gentle surface appears to shift and hint at hidden depths; retreating chasms of warmth just below the surface. His high keyed hues applied in flooded fields of colour avoided sharp tonal contrasts and any play of light against dark. This notion of depth was structured by the shallow, flooded areas of colour that produced a spatial quality within the textile of the canvas. From this seemingly negative effect Louis could offer the viewer a transfigurative experience by allowing them to determine what the changes in space and colour were by letting them realise what it was not. Freeing the image from the interference of figurative connotations, permitting the large scale surfaces of unprecedented flatness to float and ripple optically opening and expanding the surface ensured that his work was seen as visual entities and not merely as tactile objects.

Louis was acutely aware that the eye, as an outer part of the brain, only receives what is retinally available but affects what we see or how we feel and what we believe. The eye is the protuberant salient fought over by the physiology of sight and the apparatus of cognition. Culture, race, gender and community affecting the way space, form, colour and light are perceived.

Louis was the greatest exponent of a form of abstract painting that was centred on its own means; “painting, the meaning of which 'was' its means: pigment,

canvas, structures, surface.”¹⁴⁵ These are paintings that transcend their materials more than they surrender to them.

Within the *Veils Series* (1957-60) Louis approached most closely to the mystery of transfiguration by employing a gravity induced process of staining striated, diaphanous, feathered images of subtly blended, pale colours that crept through the weave of unprimed cotton-duck canvas. The luminosity and light he managed to create was integral to the thin washes of colour he evolved and whose recipe was a technical secret he took to his grave. It is impossible to recreate this luminosity in photograph, print or film – the quality of light held on the surface of these works has a major impact on the viewer. Large monochrome structures appear as floating films superimposed on one another and develop discrete planes that, with their scale, invite the eye to explore lost transepts and forgotten side chapels within the minster-like structures suggested. The transfiguration of materials into the notion of sacred space holds the same ambience that fascinated the makers of the great cathedrals of the 13th Century but painting was no longer at the service of the state, church or patronage, no longer referenced to revolution, class struggle, or race or gender issues. Painting was part of the self-reflexive purity that stamped Western philosophy, psychology and literature, and the *Veils* - “affording the possibility of glimpsed mysteries they also refuse to disclose”¹⁴⁶ were a new arena of activity.

The flatness of the paintings surface, and not that surface itself, is dissolved or at least neutralised by the focus on a shallow optical movement across the canvas creating a state wherein one cannot distinguish between the surface of the painting and the illusion it generates as to focus on one is immediately to be drawn to the other.

The relation of the edge of the raw canvas to the image centres it and aids the optical illusion within it. The flooded, scalloped margins of low colour intensity float up from the off white rim of the painting's edge. The canvas, first sensed as

¹⁴⁵Danto. Philosophizing Art. P. 47.

¹⁴⁶Danto. P. 48.

'white' and 'empty' is perceived by the intent spectator as vibrant and colourful as it reacts to the image and interacts with the vertical limits of the canvas' edge. Louis' neutralisation of the flatness of the canvas by an exclusively optical illusion transfigures the picture surface with a new perspective and simultaneously preserves its integrity. The transfigurative character of the *Veils Series* contains a quality that exhilarates the modern eye revealing how the application of continuous pressure across the picture plane further reinforced the notion that planer structures and composition were not indispensable to painting. The series brought out Louis' great talent as a colourist but the flooded technique employed suppressed the use of hue values, which may be seen as the most effective component of colour. The running of similar colours together allowed a greater saturation of the canvas surface but limited hue variety and activity. Louis answered this problem on two fronts simultaneously. He employed the standard rule that effective hue intensity decreases as hue area increases by producing large canvases full of low key colour, and involved the use of shallow field depth which saturated the canvas where the paint and textured weave merged. This effectively produced clearly defined colour areas within the saturated canvas that filled and receded in the shallow depth of the painting. These were the portals to the transfigured space that offered vast shallow distances inviting the viewer beyond the veils. The relationship of stain to canvas and to edge combined to restructure painting and take it to a point never envisioned before, taking the viewer to the verge of the infinite, enticing them to a new understanding yet to be articulated.

The transfigurative aspect of the paintings discussed starts with the artists' developments of modern painting where several innovations in the structure and understanding of painting radically transfigured the definition of what painting was.

In the work of both Pollock and Louis "no single issue has been continuously fundamental to the development of modernist painting as the need to

acknowledge the literal character of the picture support.”¹⁴⁷ The flatness, or two dimensionality, of the canvas ceased to be a limit to development, stopped being an illusionistic encumbrance and was transfigured into the ground of the painted structure, an inherent part of the depicted whole. The movement away from the Renaissance ideal of drawn, geometrical illusionistic depth receding into suggested distance, the perspectival transfiguration that would glow in the post-Renaissance period, was transformed by the acceptance and incorporation of flatness into a profound progression of layers held in a shallow field depth. While any mark on a surface may suggest depth, it is a perceptual property of the eye that is in play, not a specific of the art of painting and, one might argue, that part of the transfigurative process was in removing the perceptual limitation imposed on the viewer through structural illusions to the new creation of depth and space accessible to eyesight alone, completely independent of drawn recession.

In the neutralising of the issue of the flatness of the canvas by this process of exclusively optical illusion the picture surface was dissolved and subsumed, opening it transfiguratively from the rear, retreating into the depths of the weave of the canvas, enhancing the quality of textile as an asset rather than as a surface to be covered. More accurately it was the flatness of the picture surface that was dissolved, and not the surface itself, by the illusions created. The textural weave, quality of pigment and pigment application, enhanced the two dimensional aspect and at the same time bore away into a neutralised space that was held within the limit of the canvas' edge.

This was made possible by the development of a pictorial structure based on shape related to the dimensions of the canvas, rather than the flatness of the support being seen as a dead area where illusions might be constructed. The new optical illusion, dependent on the scale of the canvas and its properties of weave and absorption, came to assume a more active, explicit and transfigurative importance than ever before. Shape and form appeared to have been generated within the canvas rather than on it. They were a possession of the canvas, a

¹⁴⁷Fried. M. 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings' in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Harrison. C. & Wood. P. (Eds), Blackwell, Oxford. 2003. P. 794.

property revealed by the transfiguration of the new process of production. This process questioned the foundations of Western culture displaying an intensification of the self-critical tendency that began with Kant who was the first to criticise the means itself of criticism. Using logic to establish the margins of logic Kant determined a surer ground and safer possession of what remained after his process. The aesthetic was “not to suggest an ideal of beauty but rather to invoke a contested arena of judgement, perception and value”¹⁴⁸ where artwork could operate, not as an adjudicator of fixed principles, but as a probe for meaning, as a provocation for thought. This method of employing the discipline to establish a critique of the discipline itself was the process adopted in the 1950's in New York by many of the painters now referred to as Abstract Expressionists who never abandoned aesthetic values to historical contingency but insisted that values could be argued for, demonstrated and enacted. Alongside the internal structures of shallow field depth and the concern for flatness there existed a similarly new examination of the transfigurative properties of materials. The introduction of commercial and industrial materials by Pollock, the use of newly developed acrylic paints by Newman, and the evolution of a staining process by Louis, all allowed the notion of chance to enter the arena of painting. The indeterminacy of material application, subordinate to the priorities and intentions of the paintings being produced, became an entire area of process linked to areas of gravity, saturation levels, textural bleeding and separation, and dry finish.

It is significant, and definitive, in terms of the transfigurative aspects of art, that while other abstract painters went on to develop colour field painting which emphasised its man made quality in terms of colour and depth, Pollock and Louis remained visionary, celebrating humanity's pleasure in, and attempt to measure, what is not man made. It is their pursuit of the ineffable that transfigures our sense of being, freeing us from the embeddedness of existence and allowing us to

¹⁴⁸Bernstein. C. 'What's Art Got to do With It? The Status of the Subject of the Humanities in an Age of Cultural Studies.' in Beauty and the Critic. Soderholm. J. (Ed). University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. 1997. P. 41.

encounter the interactive gap between the viewer and the viewed where our transfiguration may occur.

The Transfiguration of Christ was an epiphany, a manifestation of greatness, a change in condition influencing the awareness of spectators and altering their perception of reality. The Transfiguration was more than the divine aura enclosing and interacting with Jesus, it also resonates in the *kenotic* act (Phil. 2:6-8), the emptying of divine power for all humanity.

All the epiphanies of the Gospel; the divine voice at the baptism, the transfiguration, and the angels' appearance at the tomb, all remain veiled in secrecy and misunderstanding. In their revelations there is also concealment. The apocalyptic “is the expectation in writings containing secret revelation of a new world in which God consummates his plan for Israel and creation”¹⁴⁹ and this against a background of rising evil set on dominating the world. The apocalyptic forecasts a new world after this world where the just will take part through resurrection. It also reconstructs a determined plan which will take place (Mk.13:7, Dan. 2:28) and by other authors allegedly from the past only recently come to light, but this is definitively the literary construct where the suffering and struggle are sacrificial and emphasise the beauty and greatness of the new order developed for the good of all. The personal transfiguration is essentially about a loss of self.

¹⁴⁹Theissen. G. & Merz. A. The Historical Jesus. SCM, London. 1998. P. 248.

Transfiguration as Apocalypse.

Transfiguration is always demonstrated in suffering and struggle. The movement of change from existing conditions is a movement into the unknown, whether void or infinity, but by this we may be conformed to our future. With the work of Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis there opened the possibility of a transcendent dialogue between artist and site, or theme, and materials, where, by the nature of the interaction, unhindered by any possibility of interruption or contradiction, the transfigurative act could take place. Both artists demonstrated a movement to a new status, a new perception and a new way of being that lightened the lit. A new light that changed the look and quality of seeing and being; an internal light that expanded and enhanced and directed to a vision of the infinite.

The light of transfiguration confronts the world in an apocalyptic sense observing the dissolution of 'sacred' power and hearing the noise of chaos rise from the void. Not the absolute void of the abyss but that created by an apocalypse manifest as a deep and universal darkness operating in the world. The cost to Pollock and Louis of the transfigurative process was more than extreme interiority, it amounted to a total loss of self that resulted in their early deaths. Their detachment drove them to the frontier of darkness, the rim of the void where total darkness and blinding light are twin aspects of the Godhead and any encounter with the totally other is blinding.

With the notion of the body escaping from itself we can consider the material structure melting into the molecular of the cosmos but there is also the apocalyptic self to consider. In the concealment and revelation of the apocalyptic the self is split in a schizophrenic division of opposites where neither side can gain supremacy and the self's loss of focalisation is held in the silent scream of the apocalyptic now where, for Bacon, the entire body escapes through a screaming mouth.

Bacon's *Study After Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*¹⁵⁰ is a figure in the process of dematerialising from the represented; it is a figure opposed to

¹⁵⁰Bacon, F. *Study After Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953, Oil on Canvas. 153 x 118. Des Moines Art Centre.

figuration. The throne has become a trap locking him in place, the heavy drapery has moved through him in the apocalyptic act of both concealment and revelation. This is a depiction of the crisis of the apocalypse of transfiguration where the depiction of a scream survives the mouth, the depiction of a body is the remnant of self, “more often it seems to originate from within, from the guts of the body itself, from the misfortune of being physical.”¹⁵¹ Hysteria becomes painting and struggles within the silent confines of the frame. “It strips bodies of their inertia, of the materiality of their presence: it disembodies bodies.”¹⁵² Innocent's scream is curtailed, disembodied. He is in the process of being blanketed out, no longer able to discern anything as there is nothing left to see. The drapery surrounding him has started to enfold him. The folds are infinite and mobile creating, not a graven image, but a frozen force. The portrait of Innocent is not an icon but the *eikon* of the invisible God is an instant away from discernment within the folds. What is rendered visible is the invisible force that makes him scream, the apocalyptic transfiguration whereby he, and ultimately we, are detected and revealed, our reality is unravelled and the final truth unmask our being.

“Voice may animate the textual code”¹⁵³ of the Transfiguration but it is the quality of light that reactivates the body and destabilises the minds of the disciples in a confusion of time and upheaval of history. The text and 'speech' of scripture contrive to undergo change but it is light that brings the argument to a standstill. It is light that unites the inner and outer modes of language; that welds the gaps between flesh and spirit and forges the inclusion of opposites while illuminating the contradiction.

The light of the Transfiguration is “the oscillating interplay between original and imitation, event and repetition.”¹⁵⁴ Abstract painting enabled such an imitation. It created a way of seeing that is enacted in life, a process that tries to bridge the gap between the divine intention and humanity's comprehension through the

¹⁵¹Berger. J. 'Prophet of a Pitiless World' Guardian Review, 29-05-04.

¹⁵²Deleuze. G. Francis Bacon The Logic of Sensation. Continuum, London. 2004. P. 54.

¹⁵³Harpham. P. 15.

¹⁵⁴Harpham. P. 42.

viewer's vision or revision of the artwork, not on canvas, but in their being. It is a way of revisioning that becomes a form of imitation in their lives. The light of the Transfiguration text enables a form of *askesis*, of self training and self change that the artist attempts to identify. At once original and derivative, the light of these canvases offers the viewer the space to meditate on their being.

Can imitation serve to constitute self understanding? The individual viewer approaches with their own questions and to understand an abstract painting is to come to understand the self in a dialogue based in one's own language which was the aim of every desert monk. If the radiant statement 'and you know the way where I am going' (Jn. 14:4) is part of the core of the imitative tradition in Christianity it must be that this invitation to follow the example of Christ is itself an imitation through which the power of the Godhead is translated into human terms. Language operates as a device of knowledge. Its structures and rules, its conventions and systems are nontranscendent; wholly human and mortal. In the imitative following, in the contemplation, interiority and detachment of the desert monks there was a loss of self that was balanced by a self-enrichment. In the studios of New York there was a movement towards contemplation, interiority and detachment also but what was contemplated was not the beauty of that blinding, radiated light which partly reveals the form and suggests the face of the divine. Theirs was not merely the suggestion of revelation, instead they attempted to suggest the following phase, they sought to represent form dissolving into light.

Transfiguration is definitively a situation of change and uncertainty and this is a central theme of the Gospels; 'who then is this, that even the wind and seas obey him'? (Mk.4:41). The Transfiguration centres on the notion of the identity of Jesus Christ 'Who do people say that I am?' (Mk.8:27) generates a range of options which are reported in all the Synoptic Gospels (Mt.16:13-23, Lk.9:18-22) and is referred to in Jn.6:66-71. The identity of Jesus is a question that rages throughout the Gospels yet it is within the personalised question, 'who do you say that I am?' (Mk.8:29) that we are offered the one answer that cannot be

discussed. While “it is perhaps the function of some narratives to deepen the enigma of the character”¹⁵⁵ the continued emphasis on identity is an act of transfiguration itself. The narrative produces one identity but this is deepened and altered by the narrative structure which includes a built in interiority and detachment. Jesus often retreats to be alone, resolve a problem, and reappears to continue his ministry. The question of identity then falls between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith and to state who one is, is to say who the other is – in a transfigurative moment.

“By introducing a motive, the narrative invites us to explore a whole set of connections”¹⁵⁶ but the Markan Gospel is often one of silences and opacities that operate as enigmatic connections to the narrative, as opposed to those narratives that rely on reinforcement and amplification. It is within those opaque moments, as at the Transfiguration, where nothing is explained and the narrative falters that the transfigurative effect passes from the character of Jesus to the being of the reader. As 'his garments became glistening white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them' (Mk.9:3) the reader too is illuminated, altered and briefly transfigured.

The paintings discussed do not so much tell stories, they are stories. The narrative they contain is not linearly marshalled, reading left to right, but delineated in the movement towards recession, sometimes progression, within the illusion of depth that is one of the pillars of painting as art. “In them the miraculous becomes almost a matter of fact, transfigurative of a world that has been left behind.”¹⁵⁷ Here too, as in *The Desert Fathers*¹⁵⁸ there is no conclusion. There is a quietness and solitude about these paintings that are ever open to view but never demanding of attention. They transfigure tracts of the desert environment to us, to luxuriate in its radiance, feel its space and smell eternity. This movement from physical desert to inner life was blurred by the desert monks and is smudged again by the generation of an intellectual and spiritual

¹⁵⁵Ricoeur. P. *Figuring The Sacred*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis. 1995. P. 185.

¹⁵⁶Ricoeur. P. 186.

¹⁵⁷Jasper. P. 35.

¹⁵⁸See Ward. B. *The Desert Fathers*. Penguin, London. 2003. and Waddell. H. *The Desert Fathers*. Vintage Books, New York. 1998.

reflection endorsed by these canvasses. The same process the desert fathers recorded is rendered in a new text of space and colour that stabilises the endless horizon and induces a new quality of rest and quietness within the infinity of the spiritual wilderness. What could only be embraced by the imagination, and was apparently limitless, has been transfigured into an experience of solemnity and peace achieved by the same qualities the desert fathers exhibited; tenacity, discipline and *askesis*.

In the Transfiguration the initial light of the divine met the monochrome understanding of humanity in a provocative, privatised dialectic of abstraction and discourse. In a non-media environment the reporting and endorsement of Peter (2 Pet.1:16-18) was fundamental to establishing a sense of group identity and for challenging the collective identity that surrounded them. In addition “Jesus had a much more positive aesthetic experience than might be suggested by the legalistic religion that Christianity, as well as Judaism, has often become.”¹⁵⁹ The imagery of the Transfiguration both established an ideology and continued to offer an ongoing challenge to it. The paintings discussed provide a similar and parallel endorsement and challenge. Painting now could offer a new way of imaging light; both Pollock, through his capture of lines of light transfiguring image into a unity of oneness, and Louis in his material transcendence offer a challenge that allows the recovery of a hidden knowledge in that space between the viewer and the viewed. Neither the Transfiguration nor transfigurative paintings are about content; they are about how we see and reorientate our being. These events are about how we regard aesthetics, it is the viewer who becomes transfigured into the aesthetic object. If painting can engender this transformation it reveals to us a new way of seeing, not just the objects and stuff of creation, but each other also.

¹⁵⁹Hubbeling, H. Encyclopaedia of Christianity Vol. 1. Eerdmans/Brill, Cambridge, 1997. P. 22.

Chapter Three.

Light is Infinity.

If we acknowledge infinity as boundlessness, as having a quality of limitlessness and endlessness, then in those absolute terms it is only God who is fully and perfectly infinite; unlimited by time or space. It is the Godhead that is purely indeterminate, indefinite, since there are no terms of specification or quality that can apply a concrete boundary or limit the range of its operation.

This is closely linked with the notion of the ineffable nature of God being inexpressible, indescribable, totally mysterious and ultimately unutterable.

Despite the divine names (Ex.3:14, Deut.4:12, Jn.1:18, 1 Tim.1:17, Rom.11:33-36.) God is at the last unnameable and can only be described in the apophatic terms gleaned from the early church where God has neither beginning nor end but eternally *is* the Alpha and the Omega “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty”(Rev.1:8).

The Glory of God as the majestic radiance manifesting God's presence can therefore be seen as endless light, infinite and ineffable, directed to the world in Christ who was rejected as “men loved darkness rather than light”(Jn.3:19).

“How could the ineffable and the incomprehensible be presented and delineated(?)”¹⁶⁰ The verbal explanation and description of light to a person blind from birth is useless since it is not possible to visualise the brightness of the sun. In the same way the sighted are limited in what they see – it is impossible for us to imagine a new colour. The incomprehensible and unknowable can only become visible and expressible in Christ as an image of the invisible God. Time and space can be components of infinity in a concept so large that both their boundless capabilities eventually merge in infinity. Our sense of infinity is complicated by the notion of future even within the *now* of Alpha and Omega.

¹⁶⁰Gregory of Nyssa 'On Virginity' in Theological Aesthetics, Theissen. G. (Ed) SCM, London.2004. P. 24.

The idea of future related to this (Rev. 21:6) leads to an expectation of our future and generally induces a feeling of joy since the future holds our dreams and plans, novelty and regeneration, but it also struggles with the anxiety of what is hidden in the future, the ambiguity of everything it will bring and the increasing shortness of its duration leading to the inevitable darkness holding the threat that our lives will be judged as failure. The immediate future can be structured and planned for, but our ultimate future as creatures is within the eternal ground of time; not what we have as *our* time, which is only the limited span of our lives which “replaces eternity by an endless future.”¹⁶¹ The 'world without end' cannot be confused or held alongside this world, that world is eternal, not timeless or in endless time - “there is not time *after* time, but there is eternity *above* time.”¹⁶² It is through an understanding of the eternal that occasionally we can gain access to the *now* of eternity within the temporal *now*. We are afraid of our ultimate future because we are trapped in our own past. We have little grasp of *presence* since we have little grasp of the eternal despite the fact that “religion is the state of being ultimately concerned.”¹⁶³

The notion of infinity can be seen as an exciting prospect; a never ending final frontier, or maybe an intriguing anomaly, an intellectual exercise, but there is also the dread of the endless. “There is no point, no objective, just space.... the fractal nature of physical earth that asserts matter as echoing, interlocking abstraction.”¹⁶⁴ Perrin, talking of the Arctic, sees the 'infinity' of whiteness as a never ending space, a minimal reference to Earth's aspects that are centred and directed; in the Arctic there is no 'point'. The 'infinity' of the polar regions is closely related to the nature of the terrain and climate which also seem endless - “if black is the fusion of colour...then white is the fusion of nothing.”¹⁶⁵ The sense of dread can accumulate in this abstracted polar environment where nothingness, featureless terrain, and the constancy of light and whiteness can lead to dislocation from the environment; a disorientation caused by humanity's

¹⁶¹Tillich. P. The Boundaries of Our Being. Fontana, London. 1973. P. 102.

¹⁶²Tillich. P. 103.

¹⁶³Tillich. P. Theology of Culture. OUP. 1959. P. 70.

¹⁶⁴Perrin. J. Journeys With The Flea. InPinn, Glasgow. 2002. P. 65.

¹⁶⁵Darrieussecq. M. White. Faber, London. 2005. P. 111.

need for feature and incident, for change and variation. “They were in hell, and hell means having no up or down, nor width, no depth, nor right, nor left, nor any stable point.”¹⁶⁶

As pigment black and white are contiguous operating on the same plane and not in the recessional structure seen in hues. Similarly black and white landscapes, or notional environments, evoke parallel emotions where mental dislocation allies the fractured sense of place that we associate with the void. Featurelessness is not common in our experience and our 'Gestalt' reasoning cannot function in the abyss – black or white. We constantly seek the trace, the shape or line that will feed us information about our place in the cosmos. Denial of this property of ours is produced by what we see as emptiness; an “emptiness so intense that anything that enters it leaves a trace, something of it remains in space: in the silence, in the whiteness, nothing has become peopled too.”¹⁶⁷ In the innocence of our disorientation we project our own reality on to the ontological situation in front of us and it is “the profound secret of innocence, that at the same time it is dread.”¹⁶⁸ Our own reality is nothing but it is a quality of nothing that sees innocence beyond it. Fear refers to something definite, a perceived threat, whereas “dread is the reality of freedom as possibility anterior to possibility.”¹⁶⁹ Infinity is an innocence that, for humanity, is at the same time a dread. It is the eternal open ended situation, the confusion that dislocates and disorients. It is the light that illuminates a mystery we know nothing of, with no clue as to direction or distance, height or depth. Its ambiguity terrorises us and “there is nothing in the world more ambiguous”¹⁷⁰ than dread.

Infinity then is a light that draws us, a confusion we wrestle with, and an ambiguity that scares us, and in our attention to it is a religious devotion to those aspects that mirror the divine. It is these qualities that saw expression in the service and in the lives of the desert monks, and in what they handed down to us; their inheritance in the lives of *The Desert Fathers*. This was paralleled by

¹⁶⁶Darrieussecq. P. 51.

¹⁶⁷Darrieussecq. P. 98.

¹⁶⁸Kierkegaard. S. The Concept of Dread. OUP. 1944. P. 38.

¹⁶⁹Kierkegaard. P. 38.

¹⁷⁰Kierkegaard. P. 39.

several artists in the 20th Century who, drawn to the same need to express the ineffable, set their lives apart and by their own efforts handed down an inheritance in paintings that communicate the tangled mass of problems that the apparent simplicity of the infinite conceals.

Any representation of the simplicity of infinity may also then have an element of confusion and the displacement and indecision of ambiguity. This experience was sought by the desert monks and the ineffable perception implied previously was the sole domain of the ascetic, mystic or religious, are involved in the comprehension of the infinite. This may involve a sense of rapture; a euphoria or ecstasy released to our consciousness whereby our being is divorced from the awareness of being grounded in the world and is reliant on knowledge and faith concentrated on apparently inexpressible subjects. The Rapture prophesied in 1 Thess. 4:17 when those 'who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air' is dependent on a strict morality and located in the eschaton. The euphoria, that quality of endurance generating elation, that may “convey the quite total and indescribable limitlessness of God's wellbeing”¹⁷¹ is expressed by those who have become detached from the material world.

The need for solitude, interiority and detachment from the demands and selfish concerns of the everyday world are common to painters and mystics alike who seek to explore the infinite and approach a sense of rapture. Similarly, from both groups, comes not only their vision but an interrelation between vision and the reality of the world; descriptions and accounts that uncover that emotional and mysterious quest.

Rapture involves the transportation of the artist, subject and viewer to a state of ecstasy. From the Latin *Raptus* 'taken by force' the viewer is impelled to absorb a sense of enchantment that transcends the order of human life. “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower”¹⁷² was also seen by Dylan Thomas as

¹⁷¹Pseudo-Dionysius. P. 287.

¹⁷²Thomas. D. 'The Force That Through The Green Fuse Drives The Flower.' Collected Poems 1934-1952. J.M.Dent & Sons, London. 1971. P. 8.

driving the life force in man, in all the created order. Understanding this interaction is a discipline engaged by those who wish to negotiate the communicative process that operates between humanity and the divine and who wish to offer a shared reality. This negotiation cannot be achieved by those entrenched in dogma, fixed beliefs, or systems which deny development or alteration. Textual and artistic works interpreting this process reveal an extension of thought translating the world by the creative act whereby the mystical and contemplative texts parallel the activity of the painter in producing works of insight and lucidity that provoke the consciousness of the ultimate reality. “If rapture is transcendent, it is also subliminal. Just below the threshold of consciousness.”¹⁷³

It is the nature of rapture to deconstruct, to forcibly and suddenly disorganise and disorientate. Rapture is the breach of the link between experience and knowledge that effects a de-realisation of self that can only be expressed by negotiating connections and contentions that, through the creative process, seek equivalences in the everyday world. Rapture is about absolute deconstruction located in the wholly other where our only chance of communication lies in a translation of the common denominator in life and language which risks, in its disclosure and negotiation, an eschaton as the experience it seeks to relate is of a life unlived by humanity. This disclosure places the narrator in the role of agent, negotiating the articulation of space and time, word and image, in an attempt to achieve a new symbolic vision amid what now appears as insignificant values and contradictory realities.

If the ineffable experience is accomplished with the dynamic force of rapture then the construction of its narrative or depiction is dependent on negotiation of methodologies and language – the balance between the deconstructed or non-self and the constructed narrative of self disclosure. This is an area where text and painting part, as it is more within paintings power to address, through its mediation, the gap between the sublime silence and the clamour of the everyday. It has the capacity to depict the near impossible, the frontier, the limit where vision and experience overlap to structure a language of fragility and otherness

¹⁷³Francis. R. (Ed) Negotiating Rapture. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. 1996. P. 8.

that expresses the ecstatic within the commonplace that belongs to neither but in its mystery and ordinariness is the human position.

If rapture can be communicated at all then the ineffable must be translated from a panorama distanced from it. This distance is not external to the statement but part of the process by which paintings become objects of perception and interpretation. The artist as agent is an intermediary in the translation of events, enunciating the essential aspect of rapture which is that to experience it we must know nothing of it. “We do not know the contour of feeling/ We only know what moulds it from without.”¹⁷⁴

There is a profound ambiguity surrounding the artists discussed below. They are wrapped in the activities that consume them and absorbed in the totality of the infinite which surpasses their individual isolation. There is about them a quality of the numinous; a source both of attraction and repulsion, of consolation and of fear, an irreducible ambiguity that places them in the absolute now of infinity.

¹⁷⁴Rilke. R. 'Elegy IV', Duino Elegies. Young. D. (Trans.). Norton & Co., New York. 1992. P. 44.

Richard Diebenkorn: *Ocean Park No.66*.¹⁷⁵

Richard Diebenkorn's development of the figuratively abstract collection of canvasses that he named the '*Ocean Park*' series was defined by that area; a district of Santa Monica, California. In this series Diebenkorn refined and distilled that force which shapes the Pacific coast, which has effected climate and architecture, which renders a specific quality of light and engendered a style of coastal development. His devotion to that infinite light and power witnessed on the Pacific shore is comparable to the pursuits of the desert ascetics where great insight is gained but ultimately the work can never be concluded.

While Robert Hughes may regard this series, as "may be the most refined images of the abstract bones of landscape"¹⁷⁶ this does not imply that they are pretty, petty or weak in any way. These canvasses are distilled from the long contours of the ocean beach, aspects of Californian architecture, piers and jetties, and the pale blue light of the Pacific coast. His images are part of an abstracted landscape history that started with Matisse and Mondrian and are "suffused with a special California light" that links the to the work of Hopper in that they appear "haunted by the erasure of human presence."¹⁷⁷

Ocean Park No. 66 contains the typical structures of Diebenkorn's Pacific Coast: the planes of the sea, lines of the roads, fences, piers and window frames all reveal their original marks within the finished surface. The traces of drawing and development included in his canvases are exclusive to his work and reveal an integrity of process, unique in style but relating back to the work of Pollock and de Kooning. Lines sharpened, then blurred, partially concealed by layers of over painting – cut back, re-established and ghosted again as charcoal is standardised and subsumed in the process of painting. It is this process that is the continuous narrative – the story relating to the development of each scene is explicit yet detached, exhibiting a delicate structure of lines and planes which form the texts unique to Diebenkorn – "a sunken geometry of lines scumbled over and hazed

¹⁷⁵Diebenkorn. R. *Ocean Park No.66*. Oil on Canvas, 93 X 81 ins. 1973. Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo.

¹⁷⁶ Hughes. R. *Nothing if not Critical*. Harvill, London. 1990. P. 278.

¹⁷⁷Danto. A. *Encounters and Reflections*. University of California Press. 1997. P. 193.

with paint as though bathed in light and vapour”¹⁷⁸ that ensures that the viewer is a witness, incorporated into the act of production. A witness to detachment but not dispassionate as these are highly passionate paintings attempting to exhibit that mystery of coastal light, to articulate in colour and form the non articulability of the experience.

It is this kind of coastal light that Diebenkorn has mastered; high, soft and ineffably clear. This light at once descends in an act of grace and recedes into infinity. Diebenkorn’s gift is light as space; space that operates as “a kind of transparency, bathing the text in calm, elevated reflection.”¹⁷⁹ Diebenkorn’s integrity is enhanced by detachment, it has engrossed him to the point where the deepest experience is not to experience. He has recognised that at the moment of awareness of infinity interiority is dependent on exteriority. The ambiguity of infinity, the desire and dread of reality.

The box-like composition does not limit itself by its linear structure. The framing lines are just as much an aspect of progression as recession as the light quality floods the picture plane creating a fixed but uncertain illusion of space. A soft, marine toned, light of infinity operates in front of the picture plane between the viewer and the viewed. This is enhanced by the scumbled application of paint that is uniform in treatment and tonal value across the whole canvas, adding to the subtle light form, cloud form, nature of the canvas surface. Displaying “a submerged record of its own realisation....each painting carries within itself the visible history of the artist’s search.”¹⁸⁰ Process and fulfilment are inseparable. Diebenkorn’s paintings are not specifically about the skies and horizons of Santa Monica but about the art of painting, the struggle to understand the action of light using the external references around him. It is the quality of light rendered in the ‘*Ocean Park*’ series that obliterates the circumstances and limits contained in subject and substance producing a material evocation in the artwork revealing yet concealing a light stretching beyond sight, beyond the physical and mental

¹⁷⁸ Hughes. P. 278.

¹⁷⁹ Hughes. R. *The Shock of The New*. Thames & Hudson, London. 1996. P. 159.

¹⁸⁰ Danto. P. 194.

horizon. A transference within the canvas deconstructing the elements of the landscape to bring to light a non articulation of light as pre-existent and eternal.

Aphairetic meditation abstracts or deconstructs the image in an attempt to remove mimetic depictional aspects exhibited. Aphairesis can be seen as “a fundamental pictorial strategy for pointing toward the unrepresentable”¹⁸¹ and the ineffable. It is logical in aphairesis to conceive that there can exist a point where no further abstraction is possible and only the notion of continued abstraction remains. This is a way of acknowledging the inaccessible, the infinite, or the infinity of the 'now' where no further simplification, or schematisation is possible and yet the individual senses something, a trace lingering beyond the image. This runs parallel to Meister Eckhardt's notion of image and God that is dependent on a further step; a disimagination of the chasm between our nothingness as creatures and the wholeness of the divine. God is the ultimate aphairesis. The ineffable has a dependence on, and unity with, the image of the now. The depicted image is inherently based on that which it portrays and only that. It has a singular relationship of being with the created order. The gap between image and infinity is further than the limits of language, beyond the margins of painting where the aphairetic image is dependent on de-representation or dis-imagination. This process of laying aside or suppressing imagination is central to Eckhardt's approach to the divine and the 'self', and in particular to his notion of the 'nothingness' of the 'self'¹⁸² This is the basis for aphairesis; that leap from abstraction to the idea of the impossible abstraction of infinity. An inconceivable jump to the unreachable last step beyond imagination but implied in the paintings discussed.

Infinity is at once vanishing and vanished. It is continually total recession, where we are in the now of existence, and the endless future of tomorrow. This is the infinity of God, the alpha and at the same time the omega moving through the

¹⁸¹Elkins. J. On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them. CUP, 1998. P. 257.

¹⁸²See Turner. Chapter 6. 'Eckhart: God and the Self.'

porous boundary of time and no time, functioning as an act of *kenosis* endlessly pouring out compassion for humanity. This equates in art to the idea of a vanishing point; the idealised spot on the surface where recession may become progression. The mathematics of infinity are bound to the ideas of perspective and the structures of illusionistic space cultured during the Renaissance where in its acknowledgement of the unknowable depth of the infinite approached theology in its apophatic certainty of the unknowability of God. This is the calm at the centre of the now, a space, a silence pregnant with possibilities. This is light; calm and infinite, far from the violence of the chaos of first light, or of gathering gloom. Light as an exactness and harmony; light as a single quiet voice forming and informing the viewer, its subtle intensity contains a quality of reverie. Its formal linear structure allows colour to operate in an aloof manner with a distinctive intensity and quietness that is timeless. Rendering this quality of light was the central focus of Edward Hopper. "Hopper orchestrates silence"¹⁸³ and this silence is invariably aligned to a sense of loss that broaches the eschatological. This too is stemmed by a constant outpouring of grace, an unknowable force that maintains us as we stumble through the space of time. Hopper's paintings of hotel rooms, offices and public spaces record the sense of isolation and disorientation that closes in on the individual as they find themselves trapped in the process of transit, exclusion and agitation that is integral to infinity. Hopper's silence is not based on the notion of absence; here, in his *Empty Room* is displayed the positive presence where we 'heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice' (Deut. 4:12).

¹⁸³Spivey. N. Enduring Creation. Thames & Hudson, London. 2001. P. 241.

Edward Hopper: *Sun in an Empty Room*.¹⁸⁴

This is one of Edward Hopper's late works where light is both an illusion and abstraction and where light "functions more as a symbol than as the light of a particular environment."¹⁸⁵

Here light is used as a means of conveying a poetic idea not merely illumination, leading us to question the definition of light and not just the nature of it. This is an ultimate statement, in figurative terms, about Hopper's sense of absence/presence through the use of light. Hopper's work has within it a kind of latent symbolism that avoids being distinguished or remarkable as this would make it particular to his work and thus date and provincialise it. The frequency of motifs and the context in which they occur allow the viewer to "reconstruct the entire level of experience in which this image has its sense."¹⁸⁶ In *Sun in an Empty Room* there is no disenchanted nude standing abstractly allowing the viewer to focus, as is often the case in Hopper's pensive canvases of the human condition, here the theme of timeless pause and contemplation dominates. "The light crosses and interlocks with the dark areas, creating a dialectic of forms, so the absence of any actor involves a complimentary dialectic in the content."¹⁸⁷ The interior is devoid of furnishings in any form; indeed it would function as a piece of total abstraction if it were not for the definition of the window frame and the notion of vegetation beyond it. It is the window and the hint of skirting board that create the space of an abandoned human environment inhabited only by light and shade. While this is an internal space, like so many of Hopper's, waiting for life to re-occur, idling while waiting for some drama to resume, it is not impersonal as it is light that inhabits this environment and is the active presence moving through this deserted human construction. This is a scene of desolation and, at the same time, the desolation is abolished. The removal of the figure frees the space for the viewer; removes the responsibility they may feel or relate to within the depicted situation. Within *Sun in an Empty Room* the blocks of light

¹⁸⁴ Hopper. E. *Sun in an Empty Room*. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

¹⁸⁵ Hobbs. P. 139.

¹⁸⁶ Lanes. J. 'Edward Hopper' *Artforum*. October 1968. P. 49.

¹⁸⁷ Lanes. P. 49.

picture themselves and in doing so symbolise the potential of illumination as understanding. An element of spirituality is seen in the symbolism of the soul as an empty room but is this a soul bathed in warmth or the illumination of a barren, hopeless situation? The 'emptiness' is full of light and its ally shadow. It dominates the space in a positive way through its own vitality, not merely because of the lack of human artefact or decoration. Hopper "distances himself from a scene to such an extent that light seems to play an even more important role than people, architecture, and nature."¹⁸⁸

This presence is bounded, as always in Hopper's work, it is contained within the man made environment. The constructed reality constrains, yet allows light a space for movement, activity and interaction. It provides a measurement, a recording of the movement and presence of light which is fixed and punctuated by the planes of that built environment but that still provide it with an arena of activity.

"Hopper's work appears to be aware of the rhetoric of Futurism"¹⁸⁹ which revelled in the renewal of life generated by invention and technology. More importantly he offers a critique of Futurism's optimism by juxtaposing the new alongside the traditional to indicate that progress has its price. What his work does not depict it still contains as his visual information connotes questions the viewer must answer. Is fulfilment absent from an image of longing? Questions of satisfaction and desire, of presence and absence, pervade this symbolic scene which contains no symbols, neither object nor person, simply light within a room ineffably transcending all. Yet this is no contained presence. Within the framework of Hopper's painting there is an acute sense of infinity, a never ending boundlessness encapsulated in absence bathed in presence. "The loneliness or sadness... is transfigured by the timeless quality of the light, a light from beyond that gives the whole more than a figurative meaning, an intensity that makes this solitude unreal."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Hobbs. P. 23.

¹⁸⁹ Hobbs. P. 36.

¹⁹⁰ Baudrillard. J. The Conspiracy of Art. Semiotext(e), Columbia University, New York. 2005. P. 174.

Hopper's work lends itself to a different form of discourse forging a link between the language of infinity and the language of apophatic theology. Here painting has refined different texts in a language of constructed silence. What we know of infinity, as what we know of God, is extremely limited and located in the now of our personal existence. To form any kind of language requires agreement and consensus and what binds us in these areas is the unknowability of the subjects. Yet what motivates us is the drive to understand, the desire to know, and the sense of appreciation.

An examination of infinity demands a redefinition of genesis, a refining of what we see as origin or beginning. In the first few verses of Genesis God creates the heavens and earth by first calling into existence Light. The first word is a word of permission, the allowance of things to be. Light is the first thing, other than God, to exist. Light from its origin had therefore a significance beyond its physical creation. In its primacy and nature light became a metaphor for consciousness. A state called into being by God that, beyond its physical nature, expands meaning and consciousness, developing metaphor from metaphor, becoming a consciousness of itself, displaying its limitless potential. What Diebenkorn and Hopper indicate is not only the notion of the unknowable as infinite but also the primal quality of light that is a presence. In the work discussed we are drawn to the light; we sense its difference and presence and in that gap between the viewer and the viewed, we are effected – 'I was left alone and saw this great vision, and no strength was left in me; my radiant appearance was fearfully changed, and I retained no strength' (Dan.10:8).

Any attempt to gain knowledge of the divine must realise at the outset that we are the antithesis of what we seek. 'His understanding is infinite' (Ps.147:5) whereas ours is clouded, "an absence of knowing, in the sense that everything you do not know or have forgotten, is dark to you, because you cannot see it with your mind's eye."¹⁹¹ It could be seen therefore that any possibility to understand more might be enhanced by entering an environment where nothing is assured, nothing is recognised, where even the dimensions and space, the quality of light and the style of 'decoration' deny access to immediate understanding. This is the

¹⁹¹Anon. The Cloud of Unknowing. Penguin, London. 2001. P. 26.

area and arena of *The Rothko Chapel*; even prior to entry, does not conform to the norm of 'chapel' style or architecture yet produces an environment positively accepted as sacred space; a chamber where the mind may be encouraged to confront the cloud of unknowing.

Mark Rothko: *The Rothko Chapel*.

Central to the work of Rothko is an absence of explicit imagery alongside a highly developed capacity to evoke content by association with colour and space. The use of spatially articulated structures, subtly chromatic or dramatically contrasted, provide restricted formats within which the artist explored a seemingly infinite progression of fertile variations.

“Rothko wished to establish light as an integral part of his painting”¹⁹² and to explore the effects of luminosity brought about by the use of a limited palette and the fixed themes of flatness and frontality. The ground of his paintings remained stable and constant while the foreground planes lift and tilt. This ability to control the progression and recession of colour on a single plane allowed the enlarged and neutralised forms of colour to float, breathe and generate an illusion of depth that, while limited to the painted surface, seemed to move and pulse in front of the viewer. This interaction with seemingly infinite space was central to Rothko's ideals where “abstract form and pure colour had significance only insofar as they represented a higher truth.”¹⁹³ This is nowhere more apparent than in the dark illuminations he produced for the *Rothko Chapel*.

“The imposing scale and sombre, ceremonial gravity of the paintings seem to demand an appropriate response.”¹⁹⁴ The apparent lack of entry to the abstract panels; loss of gesture, tonal contrast and visual structure overwhelm the viewer. The fundamental note of darkness may fool some into seeing this collection as an echo of the dramatic transition from light to shade, from the Texas sun to the Chapel interior, but Rothko's involvement with light denotes an acquaintance with shadow and the dully reflective surfaces are a statement about dark illumination. The colours compressed within the darkness can promote the idea of “confronting immanence as much as presence.”¹⁹⁵ Surrounded by their stark simplicity, their relentless impassivity, the spectator has somehow to negotiate

¹⁹²Waldman. D. *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970. A Retrospective*. Abrams, New York. 1978. P. 48.

¹⁹³Waldman. P. 59.

¹⁹⁴Nodelman. S. *The Rothko Chapel Paintings, Origins, Structure, Meaning*. University of Texas, Austin. 1997. P. 297.

¹⁹⁵Anfam. D. *Mark Rothko. The Chapel Commission*. P. 7.

scale, mood, setting and the dynamics of installation to begin to appreciate what is in front of them. The lack of avenues of approach to this work, the disquiet of their lack of engagement with the visitor can lead to an uncomfortable sense of exposure that can verge on persecution. A sense of riddle or parable can emerge from their paradoxical directness and a literary mind, knowing of Rothko's interest in Kafka, might see an analogy to the famous parable in *The Trial* reflecting the inaccessibility of God; "this transcendent God is light and can be nothing but light."¹⁹⁶ Like the installation, parables exist within a kind of realism we have difficulty in coping with as a parable is too real. The intensity of the Chapel deconstructs understandings of the situation almost as if we were invited to misread the contents. Like the stuff of the parables the paintings are not necessarily true but they are necessary. The viewer may well feel on the verge of a wonderful exchange, that this was intended for them, but now the door is about to be shut.

The scale of the individual canvasses and the absence of elements that might relate to personal experience leave the viewer with only aligned edges, scumbled surfaces and veiled transparencies with which to attempt an understanding. This is extreme painting and like modern, extreme rock climbing we are placed before a blank wall with only edged crack lines, rippled rugosities and surface texture to facilitate movement from bottom to top. Many will avoid this. Its technicalities and fearful symmetry threaten rather than invite, question rather than encourage. The internal components do not relate to one another but directly to the whole installation. The picture field has become a prairie; a vast steppe too great to take in in its entirety as its activity is externally focussed not internally as in former individual canvasses. There is no concealment of an ideal geometry and therefore no opportunity for imaginative intimacy. "Physical sight is impeded so as to spark a more metaphysical vision."¹⁹⁷ The soft, dark surfaces invite, but only to hover above, not to penetrate. Rothko's love of light still operates, perhaps at its greatest and purist, as the dully reflective sheen forces the object to be defined by

¹⁹⁶Citani. P. Kafka. Minerva, London. 1991. P. 129

¹⁹⁷Anfam. P. 10.

its external relations no chance of absorption into the interior of the painting is afforded.

The encounter thus evokes self awareness and an awareness of the infinite. The relationship between the viewer and the viewed becomes the crux of the matter. Factors in the relationship are physical: stance, angle, eye level, distance and height from the surfaces, and psychological; notions of expansion and release, of time and scale, and intellectual; the abilities of the individual awareness. The results of the experience are a sense of absolute seriousness – there is no joke in being confronted by such an environment. This in turn has the capacity to centre the individual will and provide an acute awareness of the here and now of existence and parallel to this a sense of the infinite beyond us. “This is the distinctive rhetorical effect of classic monumentality, and Rothko's Chapel paintings exploit it to the full.”¹⁹⁸

The forced concentration of the viewer to the viewed, that is, the individual's place in, and attitude to, the Chapel focuses the encounter on the wholeness of the exercise by refusing to allow the individual access to the normal areas of abstract art that may be manipulated by imagination.

As the visitor comes to terms with the exercise and the experience of self awareness a second wave of recognition trips the levers that trigger another level of consciousness into being. This operates at an infra-compositional level where local colour incidents occur in the paint surface resulting from variations in pigmentation, depth of application and medium consistency. “These may be 'black' paintings but rarely has black had so much colour and luminosity compressed into its guts.”¹⁹⁹ These incidents are very small in relation to the viewer and much smaller still in relation to the panels where they have no association with each other or the panel edges. This creates another level of awareness; a subliminal light level within the whole. A light within the reflective surface that hints at the notion of the infinite, within the sheer depth of darkness.

¹⁹⁸Nodelman. P. 299.

¹⁹⁹Anfam. P. 11.

Eventually, with the right approach, “these infra-compositional events thus emerge with greater prominence than the casual glance first suggests.”²⁰⁰ Their scale is insufficient to provide any gestalt recognition or generate imaginative fiction. They too address the self awareness of the viewer as they appear weightless, unstable and mobile within the scale of the interlocked panels projecting the softness of an immensely vast space. An unbounded, infinite galactic expanse whose margins, if sought, are elusive. The dynamics of the installation are such that these micro events create an experience that cannot be seen as static or limited in any way. The effect of this all embracing interactivity is to deny the viewer a definitive position in size and space. This aspect of the the sublime is an experience of the individual's part in the greater cosmic vastness rather than a simple visual statement. They emerge into the immensity of infinity through their abandonment of their own limits of experience and self where “the very strong physical and emotional sensations that these entail, in so rapid an alteration, that they seem to be instantaneous.”²⁰¹

²⁰⁰Nodelman. P. 300.

²⁰¹Nodelman. P. 301.

Iconoclastic Infinity.

For the artist black and white are only opposites in terms of tonal value, on the surface of the canvas they are contiguous, equal in strength, capacity, and their ability to suggest depth. For Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), and his definitions of negative theology, light was not the opposite of darkness but was light in which darkness was infinite light. This black incandescence shines in the darkness of our ignorance; at the deepest level of our being we are aware of what we do and its value or destructive quality but often our own selfish darkness cannot overcome or comprehend it. Our ignorance is then not a sin as such since the sin would be to deny the darkness. The need for an apophatic theology is therefore just as necessary as a kataphatic one since God must be worshipped as the infinite God as the Godhead can have no aspect of being, no trace of creatureliness otherwise such a worship would be idolatry.

It is the infinite darkness of God that offers us the optimum conditions for invading our learned ignorance of what we think we know. Our knowledge is located in language and “names neither represent nor mirror, but differentiate, the real.”²⁰² Ignorance and knowledge no longer operate as opposites in the apophatic structure where God is not withdrawn from reality but is contained in it, not as a homogenised totality but as a oneness as multifaceted as the cosmos. This interdependence is endless; infinite enfolding and unfolding of the universe into self and each whereby the difference is 'in' God not 'of' creation – God is in/finite.

To be in/at oneness is to be part of a movement beyond itself, intensified and purified, heading towards its idea. As it approaches the awesome nearness of its centre one is aware of the innermost essence, the most secret workings, the perfection of concentration. This mystical ascent is one of separation from error and evil, from the world of appearances and attractions into the luminous darkness of the divine; the vision beyond vision. This is beyond 'seeing'. It is a

²⁰²Keller. P.206.

towardness with no dimension, no time or measure, formlessness without contour, an encounter centred on seeing nothingness but a principle of purity. Paintings dealing with this area that is on the edge of existence, the margins of the possible, deal with what is not known, things not seen. To succeed they must be detached from all forms of historical appreciation. They can have nothing to be determined by conditions or affections, have no connection with historical chronology or stylistic affectation and present only ineffable energy perceived visually and known unknowingly.

These works do not require the support of schools of thought or academic groupings. Their development or growth is external to historical process and their unity is a “sign which refuses to signify.”²⁰³ It is a release from the particular yet visions the universal within the particular.

Although these paintings are not religious in the conventional sense they possess a spiritual quality and are objects of contemplation and aids to meditation. They can serve as abstract, imageless icons, aids to the cultivation of a consciousness, at once self-conscious art objects and, at the same time, detached from the worldly concerns of galleries and art ownership. They are a form of the absolute; static, timeless and lifeless yet profoundly moving and spirit engendering in the 'now' of existence.

²⁰³Reinhardt. P. 111.

Chapter Four.

Light is Darkness.

The notion of darkness covers several areas whose aspects concern some of the Patristic writers of the Early Church and some of the Abstract Painters of the twentieth century. In parallel to the formers' theology is an overlapping commentary from the latter that acts as a form of theological provocation just as the Desert Fathers were provoked by their environment and the ascetic lifestyle they followed. The aesthetics of asceticism and abstraction are both dependent on a highly material existence but not centred on it. Both are concerned with the mastery of the internal, the austerity of their discipline, and the pursuit of a perfection that is often located in the notion of darkness.

Culturally darkness has been exploited improperly, inaccurately, where blackness has been used as a symbol. Darkness has peculiar connotations in Western culture where, on the one hand, it has adopted a self righteous, puritanical quality and, on the other where black has been seen as a 'colour', it has accrued references to sin, evil and the feminine. The Bible and Shakespeare are full of references to darkness in terms of wickedness and the ungodly similarly there is the entire film *noire* genre where the notion of the 'baddie' is invariably enhanced by the dramatic irony of his dark attire accessorised by the ubiquitous black hat and/or gloves. Within the caste system and in the apartheid system there was a colour coding; a division between blacks and coloureds that graded darkness. In art this aspect of exploitation has invariably has seen black being treated, mixed, varnished or coated whereas the reality of black is of a dull, dark presence only feasibly represented by a matt black. The darkness of the void is translated into formlessness; the unformed or maternal, thence to the hidden, the guilt and the

origins lost in it. The ethos of the Plutonic suffers like negativity, which is closely linked to it, from cultural exploitation through social and ethnic meaning. Darkness is also resistance. Black is resistant to interpretation, to reproduction or duplication. It can resist exploitation in that it is unusable and un-reasonable. It is resistant to market forces or trade and commerce as it is price-less, unique but only of itself and therefore unmarketable. Darkness, like Abstraction, resists qualification, definition and articulation and links the two directly to the apophatic. Darkness and Abstraction resist attachment – colour has to do with life and is trapped in physical activity and assertions of its own. Darkness and Abstraction are not craft related and resist emotional or aesthetic labels; or any that can be defined positively. Darkness resists perfection and is perfection. It is resistant to demythologising despite being meaningless, spaceless, and formless since it maintains that capacity to attract and repel, sustaining the notion of hell, chaos, occultism and evil; it balances, yet destroys, the notion of void and myth. Darkness is aesthetic. Black is a non colour. Colour is trapped by our physical recognition of it, our linkage of colour to aspects and objects of our world. Colour asserts itself in its correlation to aspects of life whereas that emotional content of colour is lacking in black – black is silent, and in its silence questions our ability to depict or picture it in any way since no matter how dull a matt, non reflective pigment is used it will invariably appear as a very dark grey as we need light to see it. Darkness is truly neutral; it is glossless, textureless, non linear, non reflective. It is lustrous yet dull, holding its property in light or in shadow, its strength and interest lying in its non colour capacity. Chiaroscuro, the artistic distribution of light and dark masses in a picture, is not immediately about colour, it is about dark and light as expression but “expression is an impossible word. If you want to use it I think you have to explain it further”²⁰⁴ - black is expression – ultimate, voiceless and transcendent.

Darkness is also light. A luminous darkness, a brilliance within darkness – a numinous resonance which is an eternal condition, a perfection beyond being and

²⁰⁴Reinhardt. A. 'Black as Concept and Symbol' in Art As Art.
Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt. Rose. B. (Ed) University of California Press, Berkley.
1999. P. 88.

virtue. It is inscrutable and indescribable in its undifferentiated unity whose only characteristic is an undivided oneness. Darkness possesses no consciousness of anything and within it all distinctions disappear. It is apocalyptic and self transcendent having no before, or after, or remaining. It is the alpha and the omega; the beginning and, at the same time, the end since it has neither extension nor recession, plane nor infinity, it is motionless, formless and nameless. Darkness allows us a perception of the unperceivable, permits us a little knowledge of the unknowable, but is not an object nor has any object in it.

Abstraction, in terms of modern painting, may be interpreted as non specific, non concrete or even non material. It contains an element of the non applied or non practical within it and yet is recognised as theoretical; a summary or epitomisation of a specific notion drawn off and removed from the general, the condensation of an idea.

In Art, Abstraction may well display figurative qualities but it is rooted in the non representational – from the formalised, geometric studies of Albers and Reinhardt to the soft, non referential colour fields of Rothko and Louis. Where flatness and a shallow field of depth were the central concerns of the painters involved in what became termed as 'Abstract Expressionism' they were not exploring depthlessness nor a superficial flatness that was only a pastiche or simulation of painted depth. To understand and translate the notion of depthlessness in Modern Painting depth itself had to be “encoded, displaced, or signified within the shallow surface of the painting.”²⁰⁵ This could be tackled by applying a converse theory of depiction; a reversal of the illusionistic process whereby the elements of the painting were built up from the the ground creating a visual progression rather than recession. It could also be dealt with in a form of optical displacement generating a tautness that removed the slack from the planes delineated, flattening concavities and convexities in a compression of the depicted depth. A third device was their use of scale. The increase in canvas size displaced the traditional illusion of depth by translating the pictorial recession

²⁰⁵ Joselit, D. 'Notes on Surface – Towards a Genealogy of Flatness.' in Kocur, Z. & Leung, S. (Eds) of Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985. Blackwell, Oxford. 2005. P. 294,

into a lateral extension which removed depicted incidents in an all over expression which flattened the surface and drove the eye into a relationship with the edge. The sheer physical size of the canvas could create a space necessary to relate the specific illusionistic text.

While the optical aspects of Abstract Expressionism can be categorised in this way they omit one aspect, that of an allegorical dimension. Where expressionistic, gestural painting emerges from a personal source we will also witness a psychological depth in the work produced since this is expression rather than illustration. Technique, as Pollock noted, is just a means of arriving at a statement.

Abstract painting is neither the negation of precise observation nor the mere stylistic process of increasing reduction. What abstraction allows is an approach to a definition of limitation, an indication of the edge of the abyss. It permits an experience of the frontier of our understanding, a chance to attempt a partial or experimental delineation of the notion of infinity and, parallel to this, an exploration of the qualities of the medium. What must be precise is the intensity of the visual image, not its form or modelling but its integrity; in the balances of whatever is articulated it is acknowledged that such articulation is only an articulation of the non articulatability of the image. Through these aspects we can come to see infinity in the smallest specifics, eternity in the moment. By fixing this distillation only upon the idea itself a discipline is achieved that allows a transfiguration that is both defining and defined by the outcome. Twentieth Century, Western Abstract Art is typified by its place apart, its separate nature; it is abstracted, preoccupied, removed from immediate perception and its apparent spontaneity of expression seduces the viewer into the belief that they are regarding a seemingly random composition of non representational forms in an unpremeditated structure. This is one of the triumphs of Modern Painting whose aim moved from informing and enthralling through depiction to the questioning of the ground of our being through the formulation of ideas by the extraction of common qualities within our experience. This aspect of revelation and concealment makes abstraction one of the great apocalyptic movements in art.

The revelation of depth and being, of life and emotion rendered in an illusionistic process on canvas yet concealing the source and methodology, direction and final outcome. The term 'Abstract Expressionism' as a collective name for the artwork produced in New York in the 1940's and 50's is one of the great oxymorons of Western culture and art history. The notion that an abstracted theory could be applied in a random, unpremeditated way is at once an apocalyptic vision and a concealment of the truth.

An abstract bears no reference to natural objects or specific examples. It is not concrete nor is it used here as a literary term indicating a summary or epitomisation. There is the sense of removal, of extraction in the Latin sense of removed or drawn from to provide a more intensive examination.

Abstract painting is one of a very few modes of expression that can offer us a practical commentary on the notion of darkness. It is abstraction that can transport the blackness of the abyss to the interior of the mind attuned to the technologies of the current Western order where 'even the darkness is not dark to thee' (Ps.139:12). The view confronting the void, through a glass darkly, is enhanced "through a visual poetry that transforms desolation into mystery and revelation."²⁰⁶

Within the darkness is a vision and enlightenment often produced at a severe cost to the artists themselves, as operating at that level of purity can take the artist to the frontier of reason – a lonely and desperate place to exist. There are no pathways in the abyss and any meeting with the darkness of God is wholly 'other' and totally confusing. Orientation within the void is hazardous; relocation perilous where no light shines, colour does not operate, and the shifting boundaries of texture cannot provide a linear framework. Those artists who have ascertained and determined that 'the light has come into the world' (Jn.3:19) and have refined the presentation of certain forms, shapes and colours to the human eye in a universal way, in a way words, by the fact that they are trapped in a specific language, cannot, and each signifies "a thing which of itself makes some

²⁰⁶ Jasper. D. The Sacred Desert. Blackwell, Oxford. 2004. P. 117.

other thing come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses.”²⁰⁷

Abstraction through its intensity offers the mind the scope and space to see the profundity of the nothing. It permits the sensation of total presence - “the self negation of an original totality of nothingness”²⁰⁸; it allows the darkness to become visible. It is this form of painting that redefines pictorial space, stretches in recession beyond the weave of the canvas, and refuses to be framed by the paintings edge. In the infinity they suggest and invite us to contemplate, their text operates, in common with liturgy, as an act of faith. It requires that we withhold articulation, that we restrain our need to reconstruct meaning and order, and float in infinity accepting the spontaneous immediacy of our vision as if a 'darkness was upon the face of the deep' (Gen.1:2). This is a pause, a hovering phase while 'the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters' (Gen.1:2) 'who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1Pt.2:9) where we must suspend the notion that there is nothing there, or mere hints and allegations of figurative elements, and allow contemplation to draw us into the feeling of total presence and realisation that the nothing has depth and texture, that it seems to pulsate and flicker, and leads on endlessly to no end but a means to one.

What binds the artists, and works discussed, together is what Denys Turner refers to as “apophatic anthropology” which is as radical as their apophatic painting and closely linked to it. Apophatic theology indicates the inadequacy of any attempt to define the absolute mystery of God since any affirmation must be qualified by a corresponding negation recognising that God, in an infinite way, surpasses all our categories. “Knowledge of God is never purely intellectual, but calls for an ascent to God through moral and religious purification.”²⁰⁹ A denial of self to the extent that there is no distinction that one can make between that 'self' and the Godhead it is one with. Whatever we may see as 'self', the choice, assertion or agenda we follow, it is the process of interiority that will resolve the question of

²⁰⁷Augustine. *De Doctrina Christiana*. Trans. Green. R. Clarendon, Oxford. 1995. P. 57.

²⁰⁸Altizer. T. *The Contemporary Jesus*. SCM, London. 1998. P. 166.

²⁰⁹O'Collins. G. & Farrugia. E. *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*. HarperCollins, London. 1991. P. 16.

who/what 'I' am. An apophatic of language about God and 'self' will be closely linked if, in our deepest interior, 'self' and the Godhead are in a mysterious union. The logical progression from that is the question of the apophatic concept of 'self': can we disengage our concept of 'self' from the mediaeval notion where theological writers²¹⁰ had difficulty in recognising a 'self' as “there is no distinction which we are able to make *between* that 'self' and the God which it is one with.”

What the 'self' gains is experience, and the relationship of detachment to experience is one of determinance, of shaping, of transforming human experience. Integrity is detached, yet engrossed in the experience, aware that interiority is dependent on exteriority, that the deepest experience is not to experience. “Detachment is not itself an experience alongside all the rest, no more is interiority,”²¹¹ since they hold no experience themselves, but they are not inert or abstract aspects but act as 'practices for the transformation of experience' as Eckhart defines it. “Detachment, in short, is the aesthetical practice of the apophatic.”²¹²

All the works examined below contain the details of isolation and interiority; “there is humility and poverty, and no judgement of others.”²¹³ This goes beyond modern culture's need to assert individuality, or self-identity, as a promotional aspect. It also avoids the identity of self as a unified group or school of thought. The basis of self in these works is reflected in their interiority where, in a process of determining their deepest inwardness, they depict a resonance beyond description and far from experience, “cut the desire for many things out of your heart and so prevent your mind being dispersed and your stillness lost.”²¹⁴ These works have independently structured an apophatic language for their art derived from the apophaticism of language they have had to construct to contemplate their own interiority.

²¹⁰See the work of Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Genoa, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross noted in Turner P. 6.

²¹¹Turner. P. 179.

²¹²Turner. P. 179.

²¹³Ward. B. The Desert Fathers. Penguin, London. 2003. P. 6.

²¹⁴Ward. P. 10.

Central to the darkness of innermost meditation is the notion that there is something unknowable about the self. “The metaphor of the ‘light of the soul’ is at the centre of Eckhart’s theology.”²¹⁵ Whether it is the ‘spark’, ‘fortress’ or ‘ground’ of the soul the terms relate to the ‘refuge’, ‘silence’ or ‘desert’ of the self at its deepest level and contribute to the notion of apophatic anthropology where total self is unknowable. It is this that relates directly to the definitive aspect of apophatic theology, which acknowledges that God is unknowable. In these paintings ‘the self’ is nameless – “nameless with the namelessness of the Godhead itself.”²¹⁶

There could never be a school of painting that unified style or treatment of this art because of the distinctiveness of the individuals’ identification of their own interiority; their own ‘light of the soul’ and its unique relation to infinity.

The movement to interiority is achieved by a process of renunciation requiring a strong faith of the individual whose “unswerving hope is the gateway to detachment.”²¹⁷ The parallel categories of detachment and interiority often produce the creative experience “since the way of negation appears to be more suitable to the realm of the divine.”²¹⁸ Here detachment is not concerned with indifference or aloofness it is centred on a freedom from self interest or bias.

This is not simply disinterest but a constructed disconnection, a deliberate disengagement from influences and pressures met in life. Similarly the notion of interiority is broader than the simple needs of the inner self and is related to the inner nature; processes coming or acting from within. These categories are not experiences in themselves; they shape and transform human experience, they reason a purpose to artistic activity. They operate not like nouns but like verbs being “practices for the transformation of experience.”²¹⁹ Detachment and interiority form the aesthetical grounding for all the paintings discussed paralleling an aspect of theology. Theological tradition has a dual aspect, mysterious on the one hand and dogmatic on the other. The former involves

²¹⁵ Turner. D. The Darkness of God. CUP. 1999. P. 140.

²¹⁶ Turner. P. 141.

²¹⁷ Climacus. P. 256.

²¹⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius 'The Celestial Hierarchy' in Pseudo-Dionysius The Complete Works. Trans. Luibheid. C. Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey. 1987. P. 150.

²¹⁹ Turner. P. 179.

symbolism and requires initiation; the latter is philosophic and demonstrative. The mysterious may be limited to what can be articulated, acting by means of a mystery it cannot be taught but seeks to place the individual within the Godhead. The dogmatic is persuasive and imposes a discipline on what is asserted. Similarly abstract painting is fixed by the two dimensional aspect of the ground and the assertions and persuasive nature of materials relating it to dogma but is also mysterious, symbolic and seeks an avenue to the infinite.

“All this to enable the one capable of seeing the beauty hidden within these images to find that they are truly mysterious, appropriate to God, and filled with great theological light.”²²⁰

It follows that attachment, and the need for exteriority, is ultimately destructive as the desire to contain or bury the nothingness is centred on self and self-image. Possessiveness is the element whose ultimate aim is the possession of self. What 'begins as attachment to our own field of action / and comes to find that action of little importance'²²¹ is the need to have one's own core; not the unnameable nothing of the abyss but an identity that can be owned and defined by ownership. The final encompassing aspect of apophatic anthropology lies in its notion of uniqueness, where nothing is going to unite or unify these artists or their works. This is the undoubted distinctiveness of their language alongside the novelty of their thought. Their pursuit of interiority and detachment has led to statements that reveal the point where self identity expands into unknown light, “that point of deepest ‘selfhood’ with the uncreated light with which it intersects.”²²²

The search for detachment; freedom from worldly concerns, the untroubled existence that allows a level of concentration to deepen and in that depth to draw on, past humility, to the borders of nothingness, is an aspect all the artists discussed have approached. A detachment that “is so near nothingness that nothing is so delicate that it could remain in detachment except God alone.”²²³

Detachment has the facility to remain in itself, to be untroubled by anything, and to allow those who stand within it completely to be drawn into eternity in such a

²²⁰Pseudo-Dionysus. 'Letter Nine – To Titus the Hierarch.' P. 283.

²²¹Eliot.T.S. 'Little Gidding' Four Quartets. Faber. London. 1972. P. 55.

²²² Turner. P. 254,

²²³ Clark. J. & Skinner. J. (Trans) Meister Eckhart. Faber & Faber, London. 1958. P. 161.

way that they become ignorant of the physical world and the problems of life. The level of interiority achieved is of a spiritual nature, immovable against opinion or protest and of a purity and simplicity that is immutable and attracted by infinity. “It purifies the soul, cleanses the conscience, inflames the heart, arouses the spirit, quickens desire and makes God known.”²²⁴

I would suggest that there is a chiasmic relationship between the painters discussed and the spiritual writers quoted. They create a space or arena for appearance, non material appearance. The qualities of the artist and the apophatic theologian both strive within the body, share an ascetical relationship beyond and within the physical. “Through the spaces of the dark/midnight shakes the memory”²²⁵ and light exposes the physical. The apophatic tradition developed a language that consumed itself – meaning became the opposite, beyond interpretation, to be read as it is within the moment. This relates to the transference in Abstract Art deconstructing and prompting art, bringing to light a new articulation. With the Desert Fathers the body became an arena of development comparable to the work of the painters of the New York School. Their asceticism saw the body considered as abstract art. The experimentation, treatment and materiality of the desert body is an analogy of the abstract canvas. Both groups are peculiarly locked in the praxis of abstraction and theology, the extraction of an overall quality and the methodology whereby they can make their message available to the public. Two forms of praxis exist alongside of each other where the metaphors of one become the praxis of the other. Extracting a form of theology from painting is an expression of praxis and the material activity in paint, as praxis, has an energy that can be balanced with a visual text. Pollock and Climacus, for example, may be seen to be involved in a similar process of revelation where parallel texts and activities act as a reflection of their concern for the infinite. Pseudo-Dionysus and Reinhardt both encourage us to explore the interiority of silence, advocating, like the desert fathers, that inside we “keep such a profound silence that you would think you were in the desert.”²²⁶

²²⁴ Clark & Skinner. P. 170.

²²⁵ Eliot. T.S. 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' *Selected Poems*. Penguin, London. 1948. P. 23.

²²⁶ Russell. N. (Trans.) *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*. Mowbray, Oxford. 1980. P. 65.

Both have to delve into a theoretical series of actions; distil the essences of importances and translate them into languages understandable and available to all. Their ever increasing participation led to a deeper involvement in their work 'straining forward to what lies ahead' (Phil.3:13). What binds these ancient writers and modern artists is a form of presentational perception that lies beyond the physical, linking visual and non visual sacraments in an apocalyptic theology. Both depend on articulate forms of expression, a symbolic function and a logical insight into our feelings, vitality and emotional life. They are determined to be holistic, rounded and complete in themselves and this wholeness finds an echo in the theme of God penetrating and containing the universe (Col.2:9). They are concerned with form and it is this aspect, or dimension, that is abstracted and carries all meaning. Colour, texture, text and style will play a part in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius and Mark Rothko, for example, but it is the distinctive form of their work, its cadences and timbre that ring out the message of its central theological resonance.

The writers of Western spirituality from the Fifth to the Seventh Centuries share an extraordinary link with the Abstract painters of the Twentieth Century where they contribute to a discourse that discloses a relationship with each other. All were concerned to explore light and darkness; 'a darkness that can be felt' (Ex.10:21) and an approach a light that 'was a burning and shining lamp' (Jn.5:35). Just as 'Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was' (Ex.20:21) they too have examined and advanced towards the ultimate inaccessibility of God through form, searching for a means of expression to communicate the infinity around us, the visible darkness, and the abyss we sense 'for the Spirit searches everything, even the depth of God' (1 Cor.2:10).

Painting, not only as a denial of attachment to worldly concerns, nor even of self, but loosed and stripped of anxiety, is free to operate in an unrestricted manner querying statements of fashion, notions of beauty, and schools of thought, to push towards an honesty of treatment and questioning of values. The stance for

the artist is singular and independent, to say nothing of lonely for “detachment is good and its mother is exile.”²²⁷

The denial of self and status, and the push to interiority, takes the artist beyond the limits of the artistic community. Working in isolation without a frame of reference or the small support of the previous generation of painters makes the artist operate on the frontier of the unknown and unknowing where demons may lurk in the darkness.

This detachment requires a de-centring of interest and activity, which must strengthen itself from a position of initial weakness by dissociating itself from the worldly or common place, the commercial or the promotional prospect. The renunciation of these propositions may be assailed by false humanity, or conceit may retain an interest in interiority as a form of secret despidal of those who work within the mainstream. Detachment demands endurance and suffering, trial and perseverance. This is not escape, which is merely running away from the world and its misery. If this is the motive for apparent withdrawal what results is the promotion of the individual as a pseudo-unique practitioner “yet they quickly withered when transplanted to desert soil, to where the world did not walk.”²²⁸

Detachment must endure opposition, suffer neglect and tolerate violent arrogance against it. It can be met with injustice, slander and contempt, and if it is to succeed fully its practitioners must ignore worldly concerns, deny selfishness, and finally reject the vanity that can follow the breakthrough into the inner core of being as the objects and delights of this world are an end in themselves and those who are concerned with them have their tastes dictated by them. “They are constantly greedy for those things that belong to the joys of this world”²²⁹ and can only be motivated by desires as opposed to those whose interiority is driven by a powerful love and by faith.

²²⁷ Climacus. P. 86.

²²⁸ Climacus. P. 82.

²²⁹ Rolle. R. The Fire of Love. Hodder & Stoughton, London. 1992. P. 28.

It is the paradox of Abstraction “that by liberating the object from the constraints of the figure... it chained the object down to a hidden structure.”²³⁰ Through the notion of Abstraction we enhance the sense of detachment and move towards a reality in which the fundamental structures of creation are unveiled; where we enter an area perhaps more grounded than actuality, where “the finite is eliminated in the presence of the infinite and becomes sheer nothing.”²³¹

If we define Realist Art as figurative art concentrated on objectivity, then even Impressionism, seen as the first of the modern movements, was still within the bounds of Realism but modernised by the adoption of a technique deploying luminosity. It is not until the later paintings of Monet that Impressionism can be viewed as tending towards the abstraction of non objectivity, but to enter into the darkness, to tackle the notion of the void is in itself a move towards non representation, an approach to the abstract concept.

The following three examples reveal this process where Matisse deals with an emerging darkness; a darkness flooding back to regain control over the light.

Reinhardt forces us to contemplate the next stage of that process by displaying the horror of total blackness. His rendition of the ultimate abyss is a formidable presence in his black paintings of absolute nothingness, and Motherwell leads us from darkness back to light in his elegiac series interiorised in the inhumanity of the Spanish Civil War where innocence has been exposed to the horror, has come through darkness but not been overcome by it.

²³⁰ Baudrillard. J. The Conspiracy of Art. Semiotext(e), Columbia University, New York. 2005. P. 90.

²³¹ Pascal. B. The Mind on Fire. Hodder & Stoughton, London. 1991. P. 129.

Into The Darkness.

Henri Matisse: *Port-Fenêtre à Collioure*.²³²

“To render time sensible in itself is a task common to the painter....It is a task beyond all measure or cadence.”²³³

Matisse dealt with colour in his work and utilised his environment for innovative colour structures and design elements. His paintings of interiors with figures, or his fondness of the open window scene, trace his movements from Paris to the South of France's most popular resorts. “The calm they radiate is not an expression of complacency but a ploy against anxiety.”²³⁴ Matisse was 45 in 1914 and *Port-Fenêtre à Collioure* was the antithesis of his contemplations on the sunny world beyond his balcony from the utter security of his room. This painting relates to a specific historical time/action and “time is itself God's creation and did not exist before creation.”²³⁵ In this canvas Matisse, in perceiving the apocalyptic onset of the Great War acknowledges time and seeks to render it sensible by creating the notion of its end; its total cessation as the abyss engulfs the world and darkness reasserts itself.

In this canvas the filter between the outside and the inside has gone. It is with the *Port-Fenêtre à Collioure* that he looks past the shutters of normality and out into the heart of darkness. In this canvas Matisse acknowledges that the light is being overcome, the reclamation of creation by darkness has commenced. For him the apocalyptic vision is total, revealing the darkness but concealing its depths and horrors. It is depicted as a darkness that, despite its flat application, has palpability and depth. This is a darkness outside the window but already issuing into the room, on the point of dissolving into a deadly fog. This is an apocalyptic ending “that calls forth the deepest abyss, a truly absolute abyss effecting not

²³² Matisse. H. ‘Port-Fenetre a Collioure’ Oil on Canvas 1914.

²³³ Deleuze. G. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Continuum, London. 2004. P. 64.

²³⁴ Hughes. R. *Nothing If Not Critical*. Harvill, London. 1991. P. 172.

²³⁵ Newlands. G. *God in Christian Perspective*. T.&T. Clark, Edinburgh. 1994. P. 151.

only the end of history but the end of the world itself.”²³⁶ It is an ending that heralds the advent of a new state, the creation of a new Europe.

Matisse changes the surface in such a way that it barely involves a shift of attention for the viewer to move from seeing the bare interior with a nightscape to seeing it as a mobile surface, threatening in its intentions. Although he “reconciles us to the ground without our hankering after any of the classic ways of treating the ground that Matisse has forsworn”²³⁷ the surface is not an object as it retains a subtle depth and a seeming mobility that engenders the enveloping feeling of primordial blackness.

This is one of Matisse’s paintings with a powerful sense of removal and extraction, and the loss of definition and depiction adds to the sense of desolation. The flat, dull, half tones of the interior do not lighten but rather depress the scene dominated by the threatening blackness that fills the window space; a blackness one senses as being in motion. The dim landscape is just perceptible beyond the veiled rail of the French window but the scene is drenched in darkness that infiltrates the room to attack the dimming light. By using an abstracted interior he frames within the frame the intensity of darkness and what emerges is an emphasis on surface, but this is not a nightscape, a view of Collioure in darkness, but a text of the shock of war. The Spirit about to move over the face of this darkness will unleash the apocalyptic vision of the Somme. It is Matisse’s gift that the seeming movement of the blackness promotes the invasive quality of a primeval darkness that will engulf France and all of Europe. Annihilation beckons; annihilation by and of an absolute nothingness, the heart of darkness.

If the apocalyptic nothing is to destroy and transform then “that Nihil is absolutely essential for redemption.”²³⁸ In Isaiah 53 we are told that the treasures of darkness will be delivered and only those who trust, who have faith will survive. There will be those who are wounded for transgressions, bruised for

²³⁶ Altizer. T. Godhead and the Nothing. State University of New York Press. 2003. P. 60.

²³⁷ Wollheim. R. ‘The Work of Art as Object.’ Harrison. C & Wood. P. (Eds) Art in Theory 1900-2000. Blackwell, Oxford. 2003. P. 808.

²³⁸ Altizer. P. 61.

iniquities, suffer a chastisement that will make them whole as their stripes heal although they had done no violence and there was no deceit in them. As Matisse's treatment of darkness was misunderstood so Reinhardt's detachment allowed him a vision of that absolute abyss that was denigrated and ridiculed but which encompassed a total presence.

The Dreadful Void.

Ad Reinhardt: *'Abstract Painting.'*²³⁹

“Where you never hear the beat of wings or the rustle of leaves - a thoroughly negative place.”²⁴⁰

Darkness as an experience is a weak thing, a fear inducing facility of the mind related to the experiences of the body. If we are to acknowledge and appreciate an absolute darkness; a profound, total and unbelievable power as part of the initial pulse of creation, then we can only seek the unity of that rhythm “at the point where rhythm itself plunges into chaos, into the night, at the point where the differences of level are perpetually and violently mixed.”²⁴¹

It was Reinhardt, more than anyone, who pared away the figurative aspects of Abstract Expressionism to produce statements of what abstract art could relate of the movement of the Spirit above the deep. His paintings became definitive of the minimalist aspect of the expressive spectrum, “and if something becomes, it is not what it was before.”²⁴² Reinhardt in this series of paintings deals with the churning chaos immediately calmed. That gap in the interstitial darkness between the creation of heaven and earth, and 'let there be light.' It is here he ranges into the apophatic and the language of negative theology, boldly going knowingly into the unknowable. “Separating and defining it more and more, making it purer and emptier, more absolute and more exclusive – non objective, non

²³⁹Reinhardt. A. 1913 -1967. 'Abstract Painting' 1960-61 (one of a series of 'black on black' paintings Reinhardt produced in the 1960's) Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

²⁴⁰ Camus. A. The Plague. Penguin, Harmondsworth. 1966. P. 5.

²⁴¹ Deleuze. P. 44.

²⁴²Keller. C. Face of the Deep. Routledge, London. 2003. P. 3.

representational, non figurative, non imagist, non expressionist, non subjective.”²⁴³ Reinhardt separated and reduced, distilling down the elements of painting, to the unnamed and unnameable blackness of the primeval.

What Reinhardt offers us in this black canvas is an awareness of the dark, the nothing, the totally other. To approach Reinhardt’s black paintings is to learn about nothingness, about soundlessness and timelessness; to experience airlessness and lifelessness. These paintings are unburdened, refined; nothing is integrated into these compositions. The art of blackness constitutes a freedom but it is not a free for all. This is no window on the abyss or reflection of the deep. This is not nature in abstraction; it is pure abstraction. A painting about an unimaginable state of being that is “truly unmannered and untrammelled and unentangled, style less, universal painting.”²⁴⁴

After 1954 Reinhardt made only 'black' paintings wherein he attempted to delineate and de-colour his work believing “that these works pressed along the extremes of the possibilities of the medium itself.”²⁴⁵ His use of nearly black pigments (within which many colours can be detected) strove to achieve an absolute flat, matte surface, non reflective and apparently limited to the extent of its two dimensionality, but in the removal of lines, images, structure, representation, vision, symbol or depiction they become sensitive to the slightest gradation of light which can induce colour and form. They demand of the viewer a level of concentration that has an equivalence in contemplation. Reinhardt's studies in philosophy and comparative religion at Columbia University reveals his minimalist abstractions not as isolated formal exercises but as being partly sourced by a tradition of repetition, intensity and ritual in a movement towards perfection. His meditative practices in his studio – a place of retreat for him – allowed the development of a contemplative nature in his work.

The ‘*Black on Black*’ series are detached paintings devoid of figuration and immaterial, imageless images of the significance of nothingness that exhausts all

²⁴³ Reinhardt, A. ‘Art as Art.’ Harrison, C. & Wood, P. (Eds). Art in Theory 1900-2000. Blackwell, Oxford. 2003. P. 821.

²⁴⁴ Reinhardt. P. 823.

²⁴⁵ Marty, M. ‘Saints and Their Journeys’ in Negotiating Rapture. Francis, R. (Ed) Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. 1996. P. 78.

lines of demarcation, methodology and framework. In naming God we name the mystery of creation and announce the notion of unknowing, an ultimate unknowing lodged in an ultimate silence. “A totally dead silence, a silence with no possibilities, has the inner harmony of black”²⁴⁶ and we realise an absolute abyss, an apocalyptic blackness, and can envision a total blackness – lightless, nothingness. In terms of negative theology this has been depicted through Abstract Expressionism where Pollock’s *‘Blue Poles’* is a movement towards the painting of an absolutely positive, ultimate abyss. Beneath the colour and brightness of the net-like weave of the active surface lies the blue-black darkness of our deepest imaginative vision. Reinhardt plunges below the colour mesh into the midst of the blackness; moving like a spirit above the void. In the minimalist texture of Reinhardt’s black abstract canvas lies the mystery. It is through this unique vision that we are presented with a blacker shade of dark, an absolute blackness.

The squares or rectangles used are whole shapes and anything located within them relates immediately back to the initial neutral outline. “Form is the outward expression of this inner meaning”²⁴⁷ and relates to the nothing, the minimal mathematics of the square. Surface is related to the shape and provides no information or reference. The simplicity of the shapes and nature of the paintwork belie the illusion - “just back from the plane of the canvas, there is a flat plane and this seems in turn indefinitely deep.”²⁴⁸

It is this indefinite depth in his structures that make them impervious to time and incident. There can be no projection of language into the visual abstraction of Reinhardt’s canvas; it is silent. This in turn is not hostility to narrative; it is an indication of the pre-narrative state of chaos. In the primordial blackness there was no thing to communicate, no sound to make, no ear to hear.

Dissolution and indivisibility take this painting into an overall uniformity and non-irregularity for the viewer who becomes conscious that its complete lack of

²⁴⁶Kandinsky. W. Concerning the Spiritual in Art. Trans. Sadler. M. Dover, New York. 1977. P. 39.

²⁴⁷Kandinsky. P. 29.

²⁴⁸Judd. D. ‘Specific Objects.’ Harrison. C. & Wood. P. (Eds). Art in Theory 1900-2000. Blackwell, Oxford. 2003. P. 826.

linear intricacy, organic shapes, symbols or signs has started to generate wariness within them. There is no decoration, colouring or picturing, no incident or accident, no relationships or attributes; nothing to include the viewer in a statement or narrative and this promotes a distrust verging on fear in the observer. Reinhardt has brought us to the edge of the void; into an environment where we cannot survive. He offers us a puristic vision of the work of art and our understanding of light as a “patron of the human spirit in its highest cultural attainments.”²⁴⁹ In *'Abstract Painting'* he connotes the breathlessness, lifelessness and formlessness of the primeval darkness. This is not an alien planet of the mind but an arrival at the point of Alpha and Omega - spacelessness and timelessness in an endless black vacuum.

If “our deepest prophetic and apocalyptic traditions have known the deepest abyss as the very enactment of God,”²⁵⁰ a nothingness unnameable apart from the naming of God, it follows that the darkest nothing is a primary image of God and can be fully expressed in Reinhardt’s painting where the interior and exterior of chaos are inseparable and indistinguishable. Reinhardt places us, not at the omphalos, the navel of the core, but leaves us decentred in an anonymous void, an anonymity realising an anonymous God. The location of the nameless is a genuine location, an ultimate and absolute anonymity naming the anonymous God.

Reinhardt offers us a space, “a surface on which our gaze wanders, a space organising not meaning but rather the loss of meaning.”²⁵¹ If we are to gain wisdom, if any insight is to be achieved we must probe his textured surface, probe the interiority of blackness. Here there are no terms of reference, categories and vocabularies are suspended, space and darkness are deconstructed – “most dangerous places, where the encounter may be with the devil or God, and they are indistinguishable.”²⁵² Creation is founded on the loss of the abyss, the absolute nothing is destroyed and replaced by light which allows the sight of colour and all else. This is echoed in the basis of Christianity being founded on

²⁴⁹ Danto. A. *Philosophizing Art*. University of California Press. 1999. P. 128.

²⁵⁰ Altizer. P. 133.

²⁵¹ Jasper. D. *The Sacred Desert*. Blackwell, Oxford. 2004. P. 50.

²⁵² Jasper. P.51.

the loss of a body, an empty tomb which remains empty and shocks us in its extraordinary truth. As we seek Christ in the hidden body, the absolute word made flesh we approach the nothing, the deafening silence of a God who is absolute negation concealed in the stuff of creation. “The self-emptying of God as the Divine is lost in the final obscurity of matter and its being.”²⁵³

²⁵³ Jasper. P. 67.

Darkness has not overcome it.

Robert Motherwell: '*Elegy to the Spanish Republic 34*'.²⁵⁴

“Abstract Art is an effort to close the void.”²⁵⁵

Throughout this series of paintings Motherwell dealt with the dark side of human nature outwith the creative realm of democracy. Motherwell “conceived of painting as something that demanded a wholesale reconstructive methodological solution.”²⁵⁶ This aspect of philosophical challenge differentiates Motherwell from his contemporaries.

Newman, Rothko, Reinhardt and Pollock can all be seen as dogmatists, “but Motherwell was a criticalist in method and a pragmatist in everything else.”²⁵⁷ It was Motherwell who changed the polar definitions of spirituality in painting where the spiritual was seen as disdaining science whose discoveries denied any hope of the divine or eternity. Spiritualism appeared as the opposite of Positivism where natural science alone could explain existence. Positivism demanded the role of a higher revelation. This is a form of materialism and as such is severely limited. Motherwell's drive for a spiritual resolution in the *Spanish Elegies* series was an effort to find evidence that refuted Positivism and enhanced the spiritual essence in humanity. This was Motherwell's “original creative principle” a phrase he used often and an aspect he deemed was lacking in American Modern Painting. This principle could not be a style or stylistic, nor an imposed aesthetic but would be an original development unique to the individual who strove for this understanding.

²⁵⁴Motherwell. R. *Elegy to the Spanish Republic 34*. Oil on anvas, 80 X 100 ins.
Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

²⁵⁵ Motherwell quoted in Chipp. H. *Theories of Modern Art*. University of California Press, Berkley. 1968. P. 564.

²⁵⁶Danto. *Philosophizing Art*. P. 15.

²⁵⁷Danto. P. 17.

Here, in the *Spanish Elegies*, is the enactment of the abyss; “a transfiguration occurring in that very abyss itself.”²⁵⁸ In acknowledging the purely negative acts of humanity they are named and in naming affirmed in a black positivism. In the solid black forms of the series 'darkness' and 'void' are “coupled with the feelings of how material reality is.”²⁵⁹ In the elegies to the Spanish Republic actuality has a historical basis and thus carries more than one set of values. They evoke a naming of the abyss; a structure from which they have evolved or emerged. This is the negative voice of humanity through history and across the globe, but it is these voices “that most deeply reveal or unveil our deep passivity”²⁶⁰ for even if our passivity is part of an illusion, it is an illusion that has become universal in mankind and Motherwell indicates the abyss and evil from which it came. “It is the artists who guard the spiritual in the modern world”²⁶¹ and this is a spiritual painting involving the initial aspect of creation; the separation of light from darkness.

While abstract the painting is highly figurative, a reality among realities, which has been felt and formed. It is the reflection of the pattern of choices made that gives the painting its form.

The few pieces of bright colour – blue, a golden yellow and a bright red, new to this thirty fourth version, can all be assimilated as a landscape shorthand partially excavated from the rubble of war but also remind us of the national colours of Spain and the elegance of Spanish society. They can also appear as tattered fragments of a flag now broken and scattered, remnants of a true country now dominated by a colourless, faceless war. “There is an arid, tempered quality about these images that is not to be confused with blandness or faint-heartedness.”²⁶² Motherwell's use of black is similar to Reinhardt's but only within the density of his amoeboid shapes. Here blackness is total and featureless; the dead core of the abyss. There is an occasional surface movement that may denote a tension, a resistance to the void that seeks to dominate, but

²⁵⁸ Altizer. P. 136.

²⁵⁹ Motherwell. R. ‘The Modern Painter's World.’ Harrison. C. & Wood. P. (Eds) *Art in Theory 1900-2000*. Blackwell, Oxford. 2003. P. 643.

²⁶⁰ Altizer. P. 136.

²⁶¹ Motherwell. P. 644.

²⁶² Kozloff. M. *Renderings*. Studio Vista, London. 1970. P. 169.

generally the darkness is impenetrable. The loss of culture, society, an entire way of life is painted out, buried and tarmac coated. Not a shadow of it exists, it will never be seen again.

Motherwell by his work and statements found it impossible “to hang around in the space between art and political action”²⁶³ without making choices. He takes us to “the edge of violence, rather than violence itself.”²⁶⁴ The ripped edge of the black shapes represents the one area of hope. The final shape of a ripped edge cannot be predicted. Within the dominance of the blackness and its brooding sense of permanence there is an element of instability. This is the instability of a transfiguration of society and its translation of what we know as God. Here God is re-modelled in a pathological way that damages humanity in its desire to remain close to the abyss. The abyss becomes extended, becomes external and internal to where humanities darkness can be carried off. It allows the horror of war, the darkness of man, to be denied and simultaneously acknowledged. The interiorisation of the abyss culminates in the loss of our interior; the destruction of our core humanity and a release of the chaos of the abyss. The violence of the physical process becomes imperative as an energetic outburst against indifference, revealing a stability dependent on a tension held within, a structure relying on the establishment of balance from our own resources

Motherwell's blackness is torn not cut or moulded into shape. It is in the intimacy of this kind of area that abstraction may overlap theology in unknowing - “an absence of knowing in the sense that everything you do not know, or have forgotten, is dark to you.”²⁶⁵ While there is in its methodologies “conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name, and many other things”²⁶⁶ there is still that cloud of unknowing between sight and understanding. Around its ragged edge light penetrates and blackness bleeds. This is not the smooth, machine cut of durability but some chaos disguised as resilience. Its density and opacity may lend it strength but its organic edge reveals chance and impromptu gesture. The blackness is not permanent; it is

²⁶³ Chipp. P. 490.

²⁶⁴ Hughes. P.163.

²⁶⁵ Anon. The Cloud of Unknowing. (Trans.) Spearing. A. Penguin, London. 2001. P. 26.

²⁶⁶ Pseudo-Dionysus. P. 109.

present in a state of alteration and its 'tearingness' is indicative of collage structures, which if stuck down can always be lifted up.

It is the white areas that reveal their depth and signs of the struggle. The light swallows darkness, floods the edges, creates shadow and in its vertical structure displays a more rigid, organised format than the darkness. The light is disciplined and directed as opposed to the black spillage of darkness.

The Elegies are "artistically excellent not simply because they are beautiful but because their being beautiful was artistically right."²⁶⁷ Motherwell's stark forms allow their thought to be manifest and reveal an aesthetic beauty that remains internal to their meaning. These visual meditations on the death of a way of life are the broken abstract landscapes, scenes of suffering silence that hold the cadences of grief. Motherwell's 'Elegies' approach the margins of human endurance. In their overlapping forms we sense the intersection of endurance, that common ground where the unendurable overlies what can only be endured. The natural emotional response to elegy is sorrow but Motherwell's abstract answer is an expression of deep regret that incorporates an aesthetic beauty in defining the mood of mourning that is "at once formally obtrusive yet thematically oblique."²⁶⁸ The individual canvasses are much greater than the sum of their minimal parts and their emotional momentum stems from an imperious pictorial logic. This beauty is not distant, nor has it distanced over time, "the blackness is not so much the patination of age and nature, but the charred effects of fire and dried blood."²⁶⁹ The interiority of the 'Elegies' connects their reference and mood which has come through darkness but not been overcome by it. The initial divine light in its creation erodes and abrades a physical darkness that is unprepared for such an onslaught. This is the instant of the word made light; art articulating the non verbal theological experience. The translation of something new, the apocalyptic change, is translated into the structure of paintings. The decline of the figurative, of narration, of perspective, has in it all the resonance of

²⁶⁷Danto. A. The Abuse of Beauty. Open Court, Chicago, Illinois. 2006. P. 110.

²⁶⁸Craven. D. 'A Legacy For the Latin American Left' in Abstract Expressionism-The International Context. Marter. J. (Ed). Rutgers University Press. New Jersey and London. 2007. P. 77.

²⁶⁹Danto. P. 112.

that first creative, *kenotic* gesture that called forth light and is itself accomplished in the process of painting. “This notion of the reversal of beginning and end, the inversion of them... is accomplished through artistic work.”²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰Boehm. G. 'A new Beginning' in Abstract Expressionism-The International Context. Marter. J. (Ed) Rutgers University Press, New Jersey and London, 2007. P. 101.

The Whiteness of the Whale.

One of the singular peculiarities in dealing with paintings as theological resources is the contiguity of black and white. They are only opposites in linguistic terms, polarised by light and imagination but their value on the palette is the same, they operate on the same plane dimensionally and illusionistically. There is too a dread of whiteness; the strangeness of the albino, the terror of the great white shark, the fear of the albatross. We are aware of the pale horse whose 'rider's name was Death and Hades followed him' (Rev.6:8) and of the patriarchal figure of Captain Ahab confronting, again, the impenetrable whiteness of the great whale. Here whiteness bridges "the metonymic gap linking 'whale' to 'chaos'."²⁷¹ The whale represents a highly visible, chaotically mobile abyss; a whiteness that both attracts and repels. It is a primal chaos, its whiteness a warning of danger and death in an excess of motion and violence as it lures us to contemplate chaos as an aspect of order, part of the transformation of absolute disorder to the newly evolving natural world.

The whale, like the iceberg or the threat of the great white shark, is still with us – evolution has not been a shield we can rely on. Whitewashing is not something to be proud of and *Blanc* to blank is nothing but an empty openness devoid of colour. The Polar caps are areas of blinding whiteness where only the distanced and uncomprehending Western visitor would be interested in going; in Inuit it is called "*Kingmersoriartor-figssuaq* – the place where you only eat dogs."²⁷² The Transfiguration outdoes any fuller for dazzling whiteness and terrifies the three disciples present but it is not so much a colour event as the visible absence of colour both chromatically and theologically. At the same time whiteness remains the concrete, rather than the abstract, of all colours.

Darkness, for the Christian mind, may attest to an absence but the writings and paintings only represent, they are not what they represent. The option of the

²⁷¹Keller. P. 141.

²⁷²Perrin. J. Travels with The Flea. In Pinn, Glasgow. 2002. P. 63.

represented aspect becoming merely a gap, a void, allows emptiness space and accrues an element of time, and may generate fear, dread and the hidden causes of concern. The function of darkness was not unification but, in a sense, to assist in conveying the meaning of the new light, to begin a count or census of what exists. Darkness was colourless, a name for something that was de-void and is viewed as movement and stasis; the problem of how to separate dark activity from the product of dark activity – what cannot be captured in symbols, the unshareable – the void being far greater than the sum of its parts. What we intuit is that the black secret of Darkness is that it is not empty. Darkness, as a name, ghosts among us as the place we avoid, the place behind colour, the zero that corresponds to the empty grave. Darkness is the gap in the world, a sound enunciating behind colour, something we do not wish to be real – an ex-istence.

It is light that allows sight and insight, reveals colour and depth; and transfigures our lives and our minds just as “his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them” (Mk.9:3). “God's creative aspect as 'light', another originally Platonic metaphor”²⁷³ is related to the concept of the *Logos* via the Gospel of John. A light immanent in the mind but also transcending it – God as the principle of all forms is both the light shining through all things, illuminating all things and lighting the mind by which all things come to understanding. God is the source, the eternal origin of creation and, as creator, the artist of the divine art. “A transcendent light informing every activity of understanding”²⁷⁴ it has an immediate causal effect but is not an object of our knowledge. Our awareness of it and our affirmation of its existence can be likened to a river in front of us whose source is unknown. In painting it is our consideration of an event on the arena of the canvas that is present before us, that allows that cross reference from our past which will give rise to the notion of future which is grounded in total presence.

This process of discernment of what is revealed in what is hidden is an integral part of our own creation, our identity as self located in the hidden ground of God.

²⁷³Sikka. S. Forms of Transcendence, State University of New York Press, Albany. 1997. P. 20.

²⁷⁴Sikka. P. 31.

If God comes to 'exist' through revelation of God in man the revelation involves the abstraction of the ground of God, which, for Eckhart, corresponds to the ground of the soul. The freedom we have in creation is the ability to reveal something open, to exhibit some aspect of truth that is concealed in the ground of our being.

Image only forms an obstruction to truth if it is dwelt on with a single vision, as when the viewer looks only with concern for themselves. In doing so both the viewer and the viewed become locked in time, detachment is lost, and the vision and idea become fixed and immovable. When understanding becomes bound and limited to a way of being what becomes understood is correspondingly limited to that which can be seen in the painting, determined by the possessiveness of the viewer. The breadth of the painting's vision is in turn limited by what can be perceived in it.

Detachment's lack of concern and divorce from care allows a translation that is not dependent on personal nature. Form is not twisted to fit the individual shape nor colour seen through the dark glass of selfish desire or worry. The lightness of detachment allows us to operate as if everything we had were borrowed and not owned. Without possessiveness there is an element of release that frees perception by denying questions of why and enhancing a sense of wonder.

"There is in essence a detaching of self from self, a letting go of 'self-love', the love that seeks to secure and further one's own being."²⁷⁵

Detachment can be seen as a form of *kenosis* where the self emptying it describes involves letting go of attachment and a movement towards an acceptance of the universal. 'Who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself' (Phil. 2:6-7). It is a state of pure emptiness wherein "a person can apprehend nothing except that which is itself a transcending nothingness."²⁷⁶

The removal of concern furthers the reception of creation; the ultimate nothingness of the abyss that can only be perceived in the darkness at the core of the blinding light of God. God, whose being is in the light, is perceptible to the

²⁷⁵Sikka. P. 132.

²⁷⁶Sikka. P. 133.

soul when it is full of light; when the nothing of the soul approaches the absolute nothingness of God.

Pure detachment allows the perception and apprehension of being, causes encounters with the immediacy of the now, and offers a direction to the infinite.”Where the explanation of its power is not apparent it is the attitude of the user [/viewer] that matters.”²⁷⁷Finding a way is insufficient since the way can be lost, the route missed – the self must be grounded “in that which is without ground because it is its own ground”²⁷⁸and one's own ground can only be found in the groundless ground of the absolute abyss. This is the immediate now of God where the being of the self stands within being itself.

In the void between the viewer and the viewed which is “the working of the inner need....is an ever advancing expression of the eternal.”²⁷⁹ Detachment allows the awe of the experience of being; it counters the dread of the unknown bringing to being a light to lighten the darkness and in seeing “the Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness.”²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷Augustine. P. 109.

²⁷⁸Sikka. P. 135.

²⁷⁹Kandinsky. P. 34.

²⁸⁰Gregory of Nyssa . The Life of Moses. (Malherbe. A. & Ferguson. E. Trans.) Paulist Press, New York. 1978. P. 95.

Chapter Five.

Light is Apocalypse.

Within the apocalyptic genre the divisions between the inner and outer worlds are erased and we are forced to contemplate the disintegration of our own narrative as powerful images clash and fragment, and the shock of chaos and collapse floods our minds.

The power of their deconstructive imagery repels and attracts at the same time. We are uncomfortable before these depictions of destruction yet fascinated by the voyeuristic horror of what is presented, accepting its numbing savagery in a vision invariably gaining speed to hit us with the onslaught of utter chaos.

The initial divinely created light is an absolute light. It simply 'is', and stands in its absolute constancy and consistency. It is the speed of dark's recession that imbues the impression of light's movement; the absolute flight of darkness that cannot overcome, understand or compete with the divine light and can only hastily retreat from the chaos of colour that it enforced.

Contemporary society wrestles continually with our voyeuristic demand for insight into collapsing systems throughout the world fed by television which gives us “an endless background of frightening and challenging images....all raising huge questions which have never been answered.”²⁸¹

Central to the genre is the fact that images are necessary but images can be “an all too direct and easy solution”²⁸² as it may be assumed from the fact of depiction that problems have been resolved. Images seduce and the perspective of the viewer may not be sufficiently distant to effect an iconoclastic balance. 'Then I saw an angel standing in the sun' (Rev. 19:17), here the image of apocalyptic light “is expressive rather than representational, symbolic rather than

²⁸¹Ballard. J. The Atrocity Exhibition. Flamingo/HarperCollins, London. 2001. P. 125.

²⁸²Baudrillard. J. The Conspiracy of Art. Semiotext(e), Columbia University, NY. 2005. P. 98.

factual”²⁸³ but its allusiveness enriches art language by forging associations and analogies between the Biblical text and the visual arena of the canvas. This is a vocabulary beyond myth. The allusions found here are far more controversial, their implications operating at different levels of meaning, and those meanings difficult to define in unambiguous ways.

What the apocalyptic light sheds is prophetic and significant, but incomplete. There is a connection between apocalypse and the qualities and patterns of individual lives in that everyone can imagine their own apocalypse as our sense of 'endment' is located in our sense of existential anxiety. “It is in our own lives that we are waiting for, and sensing, the end.”²⁸⁴ One of the definitive aspects of apocalypse is found in the nature of its 'hiddenness'; it is at once a secret narrative that is revealed to the individual yet its totality remains concealed. This is paradox as a self contradictory proposition not the opinion that conflicts with common belief. Its structure exhibits its awesome power but never displays its final sequence and therein lies the dominating influence of the image. In depictions of apocalypse the final hours are suggested and in that space between the viewer and the viewed the imaginative vision is completed.

That the world must end is not a fact but the idea of a world without end or purpose, of infinite duration, is difficult to perceive, and the notion of eternal aimlessness does not sit well with humanity's sense of being or direction.

Whether the scientific cosmic collapse is perceived or the final achievement of 'omega man' the apocalyptic shuttles between pure eschatology and teleological purpose. These historical philosophies are neither good nor bad in themselves, that is the outcome of the desire of sections of humanity, but in the Christian context “the near unintelligibility of the canonical apocalyptic texts”²⁸⁵ determined that their interpretation would be the domain of the academic elite. The canonical apocalyptic strove to reform the Church and effect a personal spiritual transformation whereas the secular was designed to influence public opinion and political direction by its images of ecological catastrophe, nuclear

²⁸³Collins. J. The Apocalyptic Imagination. Crossroad, New York. 1984. P. 14.

²⁸⁴Kermode. F. 'Waiting For The End.' Bull.M. (Ed) Apocalypse Theory. Blackwell, Oxford. 1995. P. 262.

²⁸⁵Bull. M. (Ed) Apocalypse Theory. Blackwell, Oxford. 1995. P. 3.

devastation, and social collapse. As popular-secular apocalyptic protest spread through music, film and science fiction it became an inversion of the redemptive aspects of the religious model where a celebratory atmosphere surrounded those who sought or acknowledged their demise.

Apocalypse as a political programme is a risky strategy as systems, in a sense, exist to be broken. The apocalyptic language conceals generally but speaks to the initiates and presupposes a necessary secrecy. This furtiveness is due to a sense of threat; an awareness of attack containing the notion of overwhelming defeat and loss. There is an impression of minority that demands a quality of 'spin', of manipulation of facts, states and statistics whereby the political subsumes the social in its representation of the truth of the situation.

Evolving out of a situation of distrust and real, or imagined, threat, the perceived need for a codified language is a divisive strategy that can create further friction within the group already sensing alienation from the 'outside'. The political repercussions can lead to group splintering while the social impact may be highly destructive where questions of leadership, direction and affiliation either lead to retrenchment and an extreme code of behaviour functioning as law, or to the disintegration of the central group into differing denominations of acceptance and belief.

Apocalypse contains an element of fascination and its use is aimed at the interest and intrigue of the faithful but this stratagem has the capacity to distance those who may wish to join or who are open to conversion and, more destructively, risks the disenchantment of many of its own through the opacity of the language used rendering the message, to the insider, confused. When messages from leadership to membership become lost in a fog of insider jargon and colourful, but dubious, rhetoric the political ramifications are invariably negative.

A disquieting feature of this genre is the fact that spectators are not immediately included or warned of the upheaval about to break upon them developed from the minds of their leaders and teachers. The non Christian roots of Christianity are explored in “the theme of world cataclysm” where what is offered is “the codes of insoluble dreams, the key to a nightmare”²⁸⁶ that manipulates imagery

²⁸⁶Ballard. P. 1.

and is posited by the conscience stricken authority intent on changing the underlying unease in society. “Most superficial change belongs in the context of the word 'new'”²⁸⁷ as applied to anything, even the New Jerusalem. The need for the individual to acknowledge the reason for change is urgent and overdue promoted by huge questions which are never answered. The insiders often do not have a full grasp of the language used and this can put a large number of the group into the position of unqualified observers, and, as the process continues, they become caught between the reader and the read.

The apocalypse for the Christian Church is only achieved in the self-negation and *kenosis* of the Godhead, an “absolute transfiguration of the Spirit, one wholly and absolutely transcending the totality of the original or primordial Spirit.”²⁸⁸ It is within this absolute transfiguration of the Godhead that the triumph of an absolute apocalypse may be perceived. This is re-creation, apocalypse as resurrection, an eternal re-constitution of nothingness through the resurrection of Jesus Christ who by this act dissolved nothingness. Only within the context of an apocalyptic ending is it possible to apprehend the dynamic that will transform and transcend the notion of nothingness. In that apprehension there occurs an absolute beginning truly different from the ending.

Apocalypse is aimed at strengthening and renewing a body of belief but its perilous path can lead to war rather than an affirmation of peace. Apocalyptic light is the first created light, the light of the world, the word made light; this is the light of God, of action, of judgement. It is actively engaged in a war against darkness and in that struggle it reveals and conceals at the same time, and any attraction of opposites can form a potential explosive quality as the tide rip of positive and negative pulls and pushes all those caught up in its surging race. Where apocalypse may be an instructive and positive force is in the long term examination of the code(s) which would lead to a re-examination of central beliefs and hence the movement could be one of re-enchantment through the process back to God. The cathartic, healing action of apocalypse can be a

²⁸⁷Ballard. P. 128.

²⁸⁸Altizer. T. Godhead and the Nothing. State University of New York. 2003. P. 33.

positive aspect of faith but it does entail the participant in a lengthy journey, fraught with possibilities of loss of interest and faith due to a perceived threat that may only return them to the path at a point where they have been before. If what existed before is no longer comprehensible and appears as a dream within the nightmare of the present then the bleakness of environmental destruction, global poverty, technological supremacy, psychological alienation and the loss of identity may combine in this contemporary period to colour the post-modern age in the drabness of a deconstructed aesthetic order. From of this scenario the paintings discussed below are not content to merely provide a sense of ending, or neutralise the impact of suspense, rather they strive to defamiliarise and reform our experience to the terms of our own present and offer the possibility of re-enchantment.

The Gospel of Mark contains a 'synoptic apocalypse' revealing the author of Mark, amongst other things, as a collector of written and oral material from a tradition of apocalyptic theology. There is evidence to suggest that Mark's Gospel may have been written between 65CE and 75CE²⁸⁹ but what is significant in the text is the fact that Jesus, as light to the darkness, comes to the Temple, which was the focus of his action from the moment he entered Jerusalem (Mal. 3:1-5). His coming is an act of judgement, the first aspect of which is the 'cleansing' of the Temple, and, as he leaves, he predicts the Temple's destruction in definite and certain terms.

The Markan apocalypse seeks to uncover the heavenly mysteries; the key features of which are the revelation yet concealment of eschatological detail. This genre reflects a literary dependence as scriptures from the past are reworked to maintain a relevance to the present and their eschatological theme is their unifying aspect. With Mark 13 Jesus functions as the heavenly messenger to the disciples in a process that parallels the dream or vision of earlier apocalyptic writings which are also linked by the quality of pessimism that overshadows the argument. 'The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven' (Mk.13:24-25). The world is dominated by evil

²⁸⁹Nineham. D. Saint Mark. Penguin, Harmondsworth. 1977. P. 41.

and Mark's Jesus can inform us retrospectively of events predicted providing assurance about the veracity of Jesus' words regarding the end of the age. The involvement in a prophetic tradition of predicted destruction of the Temple (Jer.7:1-5, 26:1-24, Micah 3:10-12) is confirmed when this is charged against him at his trial.

The intrusion of "let the reader understand" (13:14) reveals that either we are dealing with an original written apocalypse or that these words were added by the author. The 'reader' refer to the individual or may refer to a public reader who has the responsibility of explaining the allusion to their listeners, but the onus is on all to fully understand and act accordingly. The phrase denotes that the discourse incorporates an audience beyond the four disciples, and the warnings not to be led astray (13:5-6), of betrayal (13:9-13), of flight (13:14-20) and of false Christs (13:21-23) are there for all. At the end of the end (13:24-27) there is no stipulation as to the duration of affliction but the usual cosmic portents (Isa.13:10, 34:4, Ezek. 32:7-8. Joel 2:10, 2:31, 3:15, Rev. 6:12-14, 8:12.) are triggered and the Son of Man coming through the clouds in glory will gather the righteous (Dan.7:13).

The loss of the Light is not immediate, nor is it immanent, but it is in process and watchfulness and commitment are called for and demands that we seek out light; 'where is the way to the dwelling of light' (Job 38:19).

The paradox of apocalyptic imagery is that it may reveal nothing or obscure the political dimension of the code in a perceived need for secrecy. Theology is concerned with the methodical effort to understand and interpret the truth of revelation, re-thought continually due to the nature of culture, history and being as it is continually seeking and never reaches a final answer or definitive insight. Behind the reason and philosophy there are limits beyond which intuition cannot address the problem. Apocalyptic imagery attempts to reveal that which is beyond our capacity to intuit. This can only operate on the margins of theology, not being theology itself and only appearing where the breakdown of society is revealed in a non-narrative way. Apocalypse is always on the edge of society,

kept at bay by authority, order and political calm. Chaos exists when supplies run out and the nature of apocalypse acknowledges the chaos, nihilism and breakdown that must be present beyond the unknown and inexpressible. It is here that it approaches carnival and carnality; the celebration of disorder and chaos, and the indulgence in life before the re-imposition of order. It is the chance to experience the new, the forbidden, the negative, and in that direction lies a revelation of the unknown and the unknowable.

As one of the foremost realist painters of twentieth century America Edward Hopper (1882-1967) “created much more than the representation of reality.”²⁹⁰ His bleak compositions are devoid of extraneous detail and his themes subtly hint at symbolic content but never confirm it. His work possesses a timeless quality that reflects the alienation of man caught in the ongoing apocalypse of urban industrialisation that was sensed as dehumanising and disorientating. A profound interest in mood and human interaction within a sense of loneliness or isolation, sometimes of boredom, pervades his work where he “repeatedly shifted his approach in investigating certain subjects to reveal further meaning.”²⁹¹ A direct concern for emotional content is central to his work though he may not have intended this aspect to be clearly interpretable. Meaning is not immediately available but his personal expression demands our investigation into the nature of light that he sought to define.

²⁹⁰ Levin. G. Edward Hopper. Bonfini Press, Naefels, Switzerland. 1984. P. 5.

²⁹¹ Levin. P. 49.

Edward Hopper: *Nighthawks*.²⁹²

Hopper's paintings of ordinary scenes of everyday life are acutely personal and operate at several levels of meaning. The commonplace sight is often flooded with suggestions of eroticism, with melancholy evocations of absence or the solitary state, and towards the end of his life, with intimations of impending loss, allowing the viewer's vision to finalise the image.

His wife who modelled for all the women he painted, whether burlesque strippers or café waitresses, dominated his figure compositions in a definitively apocalyptic way wherein she too revealed yet concealed the loss and loneliness suffered by these women and left the viewer space to determine the outcome. Hopper's rendition of disenchantment relied on the raking, diagonal light of dusk or early dawn. Detachment from the world and a centralising of communication internally are thematic norms. Discontent, lost opportunity, and disillusion are held under a light that reveals absence in the lives of silent, staring people lit by the twilight of lost desire. They appear as emblems of despair for the unfulfilled life in the quality of light around and within them. The enduring frustration of life gone stale echoes in the ill lit silence and "the element of silence that seems to pervade every one of his major works can almost be deadly."²⁹³ The absence of spoken communication is enunciated by the presence of harsh light in what is not merely the stereotypical male/female dichotomy but is also found in a helpless, doomed quality experienced by the individual under strip lights in hospitals, factories and offices. Light here reveals dislocation and disassociation where being is to be disorientated and isolated, where converse rules apply and places of care and support assume the qualities of fear and the unapproachable.

"Just as Hopper linked erotic disenchantment to the melancholy of dusk, he associated erotic anxiety with the night."²⁹⁴ The light reveals the scene but conceals the intentions and in the glare of illumination an apocalyptic tension

²⁹² *Nighthawks* 1942, Oil on Canvas. 85 X 152.7. Art Institute of Chicago.

²⁹³ Levin. P. 58.(Quoting Burchfield. C. in Art News 49, March 1950)

²⁹⁴ Levin. P. 60.

displaces the familiar. Here the quality of fading light, or lack of light, affects the individual in a primeval way. Being 'thrown into the outer darkness' (Mt.8:12) ventures a cover for sin as mental darkness struggles under the light.

In a late night diner in New York situated at a street junction in which a small group symbolise “three of his most significant themes – Eros, solitude, and death – are combined in his masterpiece *Nighthawks*.”²⁹⁵ Dominated by an uneasy atmosphere in which a couple almost touch and a where a solitary individual looks on knowing only contact can ease the tension of the night, *Nighthawks* is loaded with the expectation of imminent violence that never erupts. These people are not night owls as their tension evokes a predatory hawkishness that is juxtaposed in the innocence of the brightly lit café. It is Hopper’s rendition of the quality of that light and the harshness of its exposure that sets the scene on edge. Lit with fluorescent lights, that only became available in the early 1940’s, the starkly illuminated, circular form of the diner is an island that both beckons and repels. The light attracts and warns in the fashion of a lighthouse but under the immediacy of the fluorescent glare the light intimidates and alienates, and ultimately dehumanises.

The dark street in the background, itself the subject of *Early Sunday Morning*, “serves the psychological function of emphasising the coldness of the diner.”²⁹⁶ Light in the night café is unreal and artificial creating a clinical atmosphere more reminiscent of a laboratory and is contrasted with the homeliness of the small stores in the street that open in daylight. The emptiness of modernism and the problems of being alone in the city are exposed by a light technology that allures and scares at the same time.

It is the lighting in *Nighthawks* that separates the individuals from the surrounding community, exposing and segregating them. This feeling of disorientation may well be located in the effect of the war, Pearl Harbour being bombed the year before, but the feeling of unease is generated in the viewer as

²⁹⁵ Levin. P. 66.

²⁹⁶ Hobbs. R. Edward Hopper. Abrams Inc. New York, 1987. P. 129.

they sense the desire of their own voyeurism - “the viewer of *Nighthawks* becomes another nighthawk.”²⁹⁷

His interest in artificial lighting dramatises the changes he saw in city life and in the new forms of impersonal public spaces. “These scenes became empty evocative settings into which he could project his mood.”²⁹⁸ His choice of transitory spaces – petrol stations, hotel hallways, industrial and office space, his use of city architecture and roofscapes, and his sense of isolation within public spaces seen in theatres, cinemas, cafés and restaurants – were all linked to times of day and a quality of light that enhanced the solitude and remoteness they reflected. The interaction of new design and materials sought to comfort the users but in fact produced a nonspace, which promoted isolation and generated the notion that this naked light encouraged leave taking, or the brief interlude before this can be achieved. In this same light the observer, whose stance is strategically acknowledged, becomes an uneasy accomplice as they too inherently reveal their awareness and recognition of the situations they are presented with yet conceal their own reactions, isolating them within in a mimetic act of apocalypticism.

Abstraction can be seen as a pilgrimage of radical identification with the intimacy of creation in such a way that the life and work of the necessarily detached artist, through such an intense engagement, and, in their rejection of those conditions imposed by art society, creates in them “the clean, clear joy of creation, which does not come to a man too often, lest he should consider himself the equal of his God.”²⁹⁹ Willem de Kooning's *Excavation* is a frozen moment in the creation of the light of the world. This is the stilled action of God revealing a structure fraught with tension and a light barely dominant. It is a freeze frame from an apocalyptic cycle, illuminated but whose outcome is unknown and uncertain in the structured chaos of initial creation.

²⁹⁷ Hobbs. P. 131.

²⁹⁸ Levin. G. *Edward Hopper – The Art and The Artist*. Norton & Co. New York., 1980. P. 41.

²⁹⁹ Kipling. R. *The Light That Failed*. Macmillan, London. 1918. P. 175.

Willem de Kooning: *Excavation*.³⁰⁰

Executed mainly in low tones close to black and white, allowing line to function independently of form, contour is minimalised to enhance the all-over rhythm of dramatic movement. Here there are no charged brush strokes overlapping the “slipping planes and open contours”³⁰¹ and de Kooning produces a massive statement of quiet intensity before his work grew more unstructured in the later Fifties. In *Excavation* the pieces “grind and collide because of their solidity and vehemence.”³⁰² The surface heaves and crumbles like sections of frozen earth clawed from perma-frost, contained within the painting frame - an internal combat creating an atmosphere of crisis. De Kooning sets up a restless complexity of compulsive movement straining to reveal the substructure below. This looks raw and brutal, an apocalyptic close up of the destruction of the surface of the planet in an attempt to reveal the creative elements that have held, and caused to destroy, the surface yet fall back to conceal the horror beneath. The elements of the canvas, their impulse, which appears initially aimless, form a series of planes characterised by firmness, often elegance, that slice and shift, grinding and slashing the surface to release the monumental other beneath as befits de Kooning’s largest abstract painting. Unique to this period it was the high point of a series of paintings started in 1949 that came to define, with the work of other artists, what Greenberg referred to as ‘large area, small piece, all over expressive Cubism - LASPAC. While the name is a rather forced and contrived definition of what painting was developing into at the start of the Fifties it does have some bearing on the way the painted surface was being structured. The plates or pieces of *Excavation*, while all different, contain a similarity of scale, tone and structure that interlock across the painting’s surface while retaining the notion of the frozen movement of violence. In their large, erratic areas and shallow fields of depth de Kooning’s pieces suggest pivotal motion rather than recessionary illusion. This is a visceral slicing movement; a

³⁰⁰ De Kooning. W. *Excavation*. Oil on Canvas, 80 X 100 ins. 1950.
The Art Institute of Chicago.

³⁰¹ Rose. B. *American Art Since 1900*. Thames & Hudson, London. 1967. P. 186.

³⁰² Tuchman. M. *The New York School*. Thames & Hudson, London. Undated. P. 12.

cutting and churning excavation, fixed to reveal splashes of internal dissection and staining on the 'blades' of the outlined planes of the paintings surface. Their fixed state echoes the incisive, dissective nature of the execution machine of Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony' where the law is always beyond discussion and initiates an interminable trial against us. This suggested severing motion is trapped within the fixed frame of the canvas softening a hideous truth yet revealing what it might be like, assuring the viewer of their safety and allowing them that internal space where thought can trigger the movement into operation and reveal what the broken commandment is and where it is inscribed.

The colour structure beyond the neutrality of the pieces connotes an intestinal colour scheme and the associated blood loss of such a surgical excavation. The two central splashes of blue in the middle of the painting create an area of focus in this large canvas and disturb the viewer with the thought of remnants of eyes staring back from the frozen mayhem of this apocalyptic nightmare whose pivoting cuts and circular slices reveal the sub-surface yet in their revelation they conceal the detail and meaning, the message and mystery of what lies beneath.

Excavation appears as an abstracted apocalypse of city life - the antithesis of Hopper's single figures or empty views of cityscapes. Where Hopper's characters are silent, interiorised and laden with potential or possibilities, de Kooning forces us into the compressed mass of New York society where so many overlap and interact. In Hopper's art we are made aware of the silence and potential menace of the few who inhabit the night streets. In *Excavation* de Kooning suggests the cut and thrust of the streets that we are packed into where there is no way through, no room for manoeuvre, and for the viewer there is the clear message that this is not a space one should enter or become involved with in any way. This is an area of menace where not all is as it seems, appearances may be horribly deceptive and the impending sense of threatened violence is concealed in the textures of the city.

Between the viewer and the viewed the shock of recognition forces us to contemplate the apocalyptic sight/site in front of us, and, at the same time, the impact of relief absorbs us as we only have to study the surface and are not coerced into plumbing the horror of its depths. In this piece by de Kooning “a radical ‘veiling’ of the personal was enacted in favour of primal or transcendent invocations”³⁰³ but if we are to find the way to the dwelling of light we will have to resolve the continuous overlap of the revealed and concealed.

It was Heidegger's belief that an essential strife existed between 'world' - “Being-in-the-world, the world is always one I share with others”³⁰⁴ and 'earth' – where “the 'existentiality' of *Dasein* would seem to correspond to the substance,”³⁰⁵ and that art played a crucial role in this conflict. He never fully articulated the nature of these two elements but stated that artwork “opens up and sustains the ontological strife between” these intrinsically conflicting elements. Art revealed these as aspects of truth where 'world' was seen as unconcealment and 'earth' as concealment leading to a situation where there could be no total disclosure of things. This is the central pillar of the apocalyptic genre wherein there is revelation and concealment at the same time. He acknowledged that neither the world nor the earth could be simplified in this way and accepted the duality of openness and hiddenness in both areas. He described earth as abysmal (*Abgrundig*) indicating that it was not merely engaged in self-concealment but that it also continued a spontaneous self-emergence which involved a self-concealing dimension.

Art was essentially a process in which humanity could draw out (*Schöpfen*) from the inexhaustible supply of natural forms around them but could never 'create'. The self-revelation of the artist was not the same as the self-emergence of things. This was located in what he described as the primal 'open'; a notion similar to Holderlin's 'holy wildness' and 'innerness'. The work of art revealed the conflicts in existence as light disclosed that which was measureless, and in that disclosed the need for measurement. That conflict, for Heidegger, was an essential rift

³⁰³ Hopkins, D. *After Modern Art*. Oxford University Press, 2000. P. 23.

³⁰⁴ Wyschogrod, E. (Quoting Heidegger in) *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Mass Death*. Yale University Press, New Haven. 1985. P. 166.

³⁰⁵ Heidegger, M. *Existence and Being*. Trans. Brock, W. Vision Press, London. 1956. P. 125.

which contained the 'innerness' of the state of being. Art could not represent that rift but somehow embody it, that is, the rift could be 'set in place' within the work of art which “constitutes the primordial sketch or outline which measures and gives meaning to entities.”³⁰⁶ Like earth's 'holy wildness' it can never be wholly present.

“Another difficulty arises from Heidegger's attitude to philosophic language.”³⁰⁷ Ultimately Heidegger saw art as “Vorstellen”(representation) ranged alongside “Gegenstand”(object)³⁰⁸ or equipment, but if a work of art becomes a mere commodity, as in a financial investment, it no longer is what it was. The artwork while being of the world and making no practical contribution to the ontological state has the capacity to open the route to a new one – a truly revolutionary aspect. The artwork is not reliant on substance external to it, rather it comes from that creational abyss to provide the ground and limit of the events within the sphere it encompasses. While for Heidegger the work of art did not serve a 'purpose' paradoxically it was the way to that purpose, the direction of the ultimate ground of being.

In 'Art and Space' (1969) he defined art space beyond the notion of the physical space that a work of art occupies: the space of art activity where the artwork embodies “a place within a pre-existing historical world, while simultaneously clearing a new place for itself out of which a new world can unfold.”³⁰⁹ Parallel to this is the space 'of' the work of art wherein, between the viewer and the viewed, that path to an ultimate ground may be discerned. Such a revelation discloses the undifferentiated nature of the surrounding space, the separate reality of depicted space and the primal space of the abyss where, within the absolute ground of nothingness we find presence.

Heidegger's view of Abstract Expressionism was that “in such an age art becomes object-less” and is trapped within a narrow post-Romantic, subjective conception of art that is strongly nostalgic. “Great art had been undermined by

³⁰⁶Zimmerman. M. Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis. 1990. P. 123.

³⁰⁷Brock. W. 'An Account of "The Four Essays" in Existence and Being. P. 144.

³⁰⁸Brock. P. 144.

³⁰⁹Zimmerman. P. 236.

subjectivism, commercialism, and other aspects of the technological epoch.”³¹⁰ Modern Art had no direction, no light, reduced everything to undifferentiated units and left Heidegger in the darkness of 'degenerate art'.

It was Rilke in the autumn of 1907 who saw in the work of Cezanne the process whereby the object was translated into the object it now was. Cezanne had freed the objects from their status as commodities; he had loosed these new objects on the world and in so doing had released the viewer from the mechanical way of perceiving them. A new mode of ontological perception was transforming the ordinary into a multi-faceted, interactive arena where, in the gap between work and spectator, a greater articulation was possible. This 'form' disclosed its creation, moved into a different space as a new object, and left an open question to the viewer. Man could endorse a power already within him by depicting a world where the form could unfold and provoke “the non-representational, non-calculative, meditative thinking”³¹¹ which would allow the apocalyptic vision to be read more freely, considered more deeply, and indicate more directly.

Apocalypse is definitely dichotomous, simultaneously the total ending of the world and an absolute beginning of a new world. It is a clash of opposites, a *coincidentia oppositorum*, veiling and revealing the work of God and the mystery of Jesus, the height of grace and the depth of sin. The movement through the history of Christianity has been at one time apocalyptic, nonapocalyptic and antiapocalyptic yet the truly apocalyptic aspect of Christianity is in the Crucifixion and the resulting “absolute transformation of the deepest grounds of the Godhead itself.”³¹² Jesus' eschatological and apocalyptic proclamation of the Kingdom of God, his parabolic language reversing the thoughts and beliefs of the community, and his resurrection reversing death and unveiling the life to come set up an absolutely new reality.

³¹⁰Zimmerman. P. 237.

³¹¹Zimmerman. P. 113.

³¹²Altizer. P. XVII.

God becomes the mystery in Jesus as the crucified God; absolute paradox and absolute *kenosis*. A mystery deepened and disguised by the evolved history of Christianity, yet the clash of opposites is at the centre of Christian faith where Christ is the ultimate clash of opposites incorporating the depths of God in an apocalyptic darkness which is inseparable from apocalyptic light and finally indistinguishable from that light. If the deepest darkness is only revealed immediately prior to transformation then by reversing our image of Jesus, by applying the language of the parabolic we may be able to open our minds to his contemporary and apocalyptic presence. The paintings discussed above exhibit that paradox of that presence: the deepest personal darkness within the brightest light that Hopper could construct, the dislocated parabolic confusion of de Kooning's *Excavation* hovers above the point of absolute destruction and re-creation. Both works are poised over the void of apocalypse and illustrate the innate concern humanity has in our deepest imaginings for the cataclysm of apocalypse that we acknowledge but try to ignore.

“Never stop imagining and examining the abyss of dark fire.”³¹³

Climacus' command prompts us to search the apocalyptic vision and the imaginative vision in Theology has often been encouraged and always supported visually. The paradox of the crucified God and the mystery of God in man are accepted in the Christian imagination. This darkness is part of theological history, revealed and hidden in text and image. It is an apocalyptic darkness that is not only inseparable from the light but in fact cannot be differentiated from the light as the revelation of apocalypse is total and absolute; an all consuming event of renewal repeated in the deepest expressions of Christianity. Despite the assurances of Daniel 12:11-13 the day of wrath is predicted (Isa.13:9) as one of desolation and destruction.

³¹³ Climacus. P. 137.

Central to that is the knowledge of Christ as the revealer yet concealer of the Godhead and it is in this apocalyptic act of total revelation that time and eternity, infinity and limitation, material and spirit merge and the consciousness of creation is transformed.

What the artists discussed illustrate is the on-rushing darkness and the pressure generated on humanity who are made aware that 'even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees' (Mt.3:10) that do not bear good fruit and that 'there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning' (Mt.24:21-22). The contradiction of the revealer and saviour also being the destroyer and concealer, slaying 'with the breath of his mouth' and destroying by his very appearance (2 Thess.2:8) is the conflict that de Kooning sets up in *Excavation* and the painful balance Hopper articulates in *Nighthawks*.

If the apocalyptic is seen as the eschaton then it has "always known that the deepest darkness is fully realised only immediately prior to total transformation."³¹⁴ Hopper's image provokes transformation within the viewer's mental state; de Kooning takes the spectator to the brink of structural collapse to hover above the void, and both operate as apocalyptic works as their revelations display only the edge of the abyss and do not disclose the might of the eschaton. This is a constant undercurrent in Christianity stemming from the deferral of the expected Parousia. The anguish within the balance of dark and light in *Nighthawks*; the confrontation of imminent destruction in *Excavation* reflect the condition of humanity disturbed by the semi apocalyptic state of their existence where hints and allegations, threats and assurances vie for dominance and our only course of action is "not to abandon the transcendent height by the things already attained"³¹⁵ and to 'press on' – 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead' (Phil. 3:13).

It is by the process of perfection, by searching Climacus' abyss of dark fire, itself an intriguing visual reference, in the widest possible context that the intertextuality of the apocalyptic image becomes perceptible and word becomes

³¹⁴Altizer. T. *The Contemporary Jesus*. SCM, London. 1998. P. XXV.

³¹⁵Gregory of Nyssa. *The Life of Moses*. (Trans.) Malherbe. A. & Ferguson. E. Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey . 1978. P. 113.

vision and image becomes a commentary on the word as “each thing seen leads to the contemplation of a concept appropriate.”³¹⁶ The paintings discussed allow knowledge gleaned from past texts to be re-experienced and permit future ones to be implied. They act as “a kind of narration akin to demonstration, by which things in the present, and not in the past, are communicated to people unfamiliar with them.”

³¹⁶Gregory of Nyssa. P. 99.

Chapter Six.

Light is Shadow.

Simultaneously, in the instant of creation, the divine light creates shadow, as form and contour are uncovered but, while darkness is diminished and flees, shadows, in a sense, race for cover. Light burns away darkness but shadows withdraw and retain an atavism in their heritage. “What light has veiled, let darkness now uncover”³¹⁷ and it is within the darkness of the chaos of colour, it too simultaneously gifted with the creation of light, that the secrets of shadow will be revealed in that moment of mystery, possibly of trance, in a pensive lustre, never in a shallow brilliance. The magic of cloudy translucence, a faint dreamlike glow emerging from the shadows that imbues a reign of utter stillness and silence where an alteration in light intensity either way would, in an instant, revert the space to a void of discontent.

“Shadow originates in a local and relative deficiency of visible light”³¹⁸ within the relationship between the flow of light and opaque matter. Structure is indicated briefly, sketched and intimated by shadow whose temporary change alerts us to the notion of time locked, or freed, within an image; “our time is a very shadow that passes away” (Song of Sol. 2:5). Light is energy on the move and shadow may seem as a secondary issue arising from the interaction of light and solid object but in the shadow's immobility time may come to meet us and present itself as substance – “time so full it ceases to be.”³¹⁹ It is the shadow that provides eternal potential as if light has paused above the world and in that moment is fixed, rooted in a continuous pause but full of latent movement that could reveal the hidden, immanent description of “the country that only knows eternity.”³²⁰

³¹⁷Duhig, I. 'Fauvel Love Song', in *The Speed of Dark*. Picador, London. 2007. P. 28.

³¹⁸Baxandall, M. *Shadows and Enlightenment*. Yale U.P., New Haven. 1995. P. 1.

³¹⁹ Bonnefoy. 'Passing by the Fire.' *In the Shadows Light*. Naughton, J. (Trans.) University of Chicago. 1991. P. 37.

³²⁰ Bonnefoy. 'The Well, The Brambles.' P. 41.

Within the notion of shadow there is generally an element of disregard operating in respect of the transformative aspects of shadows. They can be dismissed as shaded patches, lifeless spots out of the main area of interest and not worthy of concern or study, not intrinsically valuable in themselves yet this is a process of deferral, of postponement and relocation of light which holds a rearrangement of colour. This reorganisation is a suspension of light and time, an example of the *now* that can give access to infinity. In that sense we may live in/as shadows since to be is to be deferred where our lives are in suspension like shadows. We are relocated in life as we await infinity. Any attempt to gain the light, to become perfection can only be perfection through postponement to the totally other. This simultaneous deferral of, and insistence on, meaning creates a certain irony in shadow in that it can be overloaded with factual details but their significance remains a riddle.

Shadow is at once a departure point and an arrival location full of the displacements inherent in the ongoing struggle to be sited in the *now*. Shadows dull and partially conceal yet as part of the same play of light reveal everything but pose frames of reference and specifics of site. Self-reflection is integral to the activity of shadow images as they flow over the factual gravel of a scene with their fluid incongruences. This may contribute to the impression that they are fugitive, which in terms of directional light they are, but in their representation the element of foreclosure is absent and there exists a logic that strives to determine and order planes.

The symbiotic relationship between light, object and shadow transforms our world in parallel to our capacity for sight, perception and integration whereby we are informed of “the nature of the ‘object’ relation rather than the qualities of the object as object.”³²¹ Where the object is known and recognised shadow may become representational knowing and in that transitional experience is found the freedom of metaphor where an actual process can be displaced into symbolic statements. These symbolic equivalents are found in Christian faith where transfiguration changed the external environment and the internal mood, and

³²¹ Bollas. C. The Shadow of The Object. Free Association Books, London. 1987. P. 14.

Christians still worship “in the shadow of the Galilean.” This parallel where the light of experience creates a shadow where reflection can be nurtured is where we may find “the spirit of the object, a rendezvous of mute recognition that defies representation”³²²

³²² Bollas. P. 30.

William Holman Hunt: *The Shadow of Death*.³²³

Here the artist's concern was with a pictorial, shadowing, symbolism demanding an immediate emotional response coupled with one that was meditative and analytical. Hunt's shadow symbolism appears as "a natural language inherent in the visual details themselves"³²⁴ in a combination of Pre-Raphaelite realism and an intricate symbolism that aimed at a Dickensian mass audience where the simultaneously popular appeal and intellectual interest that would blend a revival of iconographic traditions and convey important truths of mind and spirit. Within *The Shadow of Death* a splash of blood on his foot is a prefiguration of the wounds he will bear on the cross "while the tools on the wall behind him foreshadow the instruments of the Passion."³²⁵

This use of objects and the correspondence between them and the realities that they typified was a aspect of mainly Christian theology that Hunt made an integral part of his paintings. The typological symbolism utilised in *The Shadow of Death* renders the picture static as in his *The Scapegoat*. Christ's prayerful attitude at the end of a working day freezes the dramatic action and this stasis is endorsed by Mary's re-discovery of the Magi's gifts. Here the shadow play is the juxtaposition of explicit symbols rather than their incorporation into the realistically conceived event. The shadow forms a prevision of the crucifixion and the rest of the Passion falls into place where the tools denote the scourging and nailing, the reeds in the corner the mocking of the soldiers. The small arched room can be seen as a pre-echo of the tomb with its garden outside. The crown of thorns imagery lies on the floor where a red headband, the red wool as that tied to the scapegoat, is coated in barbed wood shavings. A scroll on the window ledge reminds us of the foretelling of events and the two pomegranates – passion fruit are a further indication. His clothing is automatically associated with the

³²³ Hunt, W.H. *The Shadow of Death*. Oil on Canvas. 1873. Manchester City Art Gallery.

³²⁴ Landow, G. *William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism*. Yale University Press. 1979. P. 4.

³²⁵ Landow. P. 65.

crucifixion and the Star of David denotes his status while the curve of light acts as a halo completing the image.

The balance of the Magi's gifts, symbolising earthly power and glory, is held in the shadow's indication of the basest of deaths. The shadow serves as "a bitter annunciation to Mary of her son's fate".³²⁶ Here Hunt has employed an antithetical shadow of annunciation compared to the angelic shadows performing in many of the Annunciations of the Northern Renaissance using similar iconography to generate the resonating fusion of body and spirit, time and infinity. Here it is the shadow that has arrested the Virgin's attention.

Hunt's *Shadow* "asserts that Christ's very descent into human flesh is both a source and type of his later sacrifice"³²⁷ but it is the shadow play that intensifies this painful recognition. This is not just a spectre of Jesus' earthly future but shadow as a prophetic force, as an informative agent in our lives. The blend of realism and symbolism is seen in the life of Christ and forms a visual theology that surrounds us in our own lives where shadows have their own realism and depict our own prefigurations as opposed to merely clouding the surface.

'Keep me as the apple of an eye; hide me under the shadow of your wings' (Ps.17:8) - the experience of this redefines time into a space where the subject and object appear to achieve a close integration; 'in the shadow of his hand he hid me' (Isa.49:2). It is this space, most often utilised in paintings, that can allow us to decode and to interact with the space of infinity, to make sense of the sacred event in the shadows cast by divine light. While liturgy may expand the interpretation of such events they are interiorly wordless occasions where actions and events operate in the transition of dark to light.

There can be a tendency for humanity to structure its world, systems and social relationships in the dual format of the right and left, day and night, the binary opposites of the dexter and sinister of the light and dark order. Shadow, in some cases, has been regarded as a negative area. The shade and half light have been perceived as areas of uncertainty and chance where details are lost in the

³²⁶ Landow. P. 121.

³²⁷ Landow. P. 143.

diffusion of light. This is the sense of shadow as an aspect of darkness, a danger area where threat may advance under cover of the gloom and await the unwary at the edge of light. Shadow has its positive place also; we should not be afraid of our own shadow as this is part of our presence and being. Cultural definitions can shift our ideas of shade; the Northern European winter evokes the dark and shadowy forest as alive with menace while in the desert shade is a good, welcoming thing. This aspect too betokens a presence that is cooling and refreshing. Shadows can be seen then as an area of half light; an area of chance and change and this is the location of the subtle movement of possibility where the viewer may half close their eyes to cut out the glare and in so doing discovers the delineation of the narrative. This is the arena where the unthought may become known.

“As if the stuff that colour is made of
Had just been rent to the very depths of things.”³²⁸

Shadows can be seen as a form of *déjà vu*, “an existential memory: a non representational recollection conveyed through the sense of the uncanny.”³²⁹ This effect can seem familiar, and may even hold a spiritual quality, and this notion is enhanced because the shadow memory is beyond our comprehension. The effect of the 'already seen' is assimilated as an experience in being rather than memory or recollection of a specific event since it relates to an area where an experience of union already experienced with the other was an aspect of life before language was structured.

Our shadow is a statement of self as a feature of being, as opposed to the product of imagination, and assists us to provide a vocabulary of the self. It is the shadow of the self, rather than the mirror image, that allows us our own visual image of movement and vitality. Through the shadow “we learn the grammar of our being before we grasp the rules of our language.”³³⁰

³²⁸ Bonnefoy. Y. ‘The Memory’ P. 3.

³²⁹ Bollas. P. 32.

³³⁰ Bollas. P. 36.

The shadow can be an evocative resurrection triggered by a strange connection with the shaded object; as the object casts its shadow, shadow may become the subject. It is a pre-verbal, pre-representational registration of the other's presence when, as we endure a sense of the strange but familiar, we dwell within "a spirit of place the creation of which is not identifiable."³³¹

It is the shadow that brings us into contact with our own internal and idiosyncratic style. We wish for greater clarity and approach our reflected self to define an aesthetic, an aesthetic that is itself a shadow cast by the ego style; the individual aesthetic we accrue, that lies latent in each of us. Our *ombre* relates to trace, secret, pretext, concealment, and ultimately threat coloured by the denial of the light.

In the depiction of light in painting it is often the shadow that illuminates the underlying structure, that holds the key to the internal meaning of the composition, and that creates the space wherein the viewer may interact with the canvas.

The shadowed figure does not suffer from a lack of self; in fact it may be safely distanced from the illuminated, stabilised self. In painting the figure is related to the space around it. The shadowed figure, and the shadows it casts, disassembles space as shadow does not bestow form but creates shape, but within that shape was discovered a colour structure that changed the direction of painting.

Shadow, in art, is used to define illusionistic form, is a traditional aspect of modelling light and shade. Its use in architectural detail and in still life follows an academic tradition of skilful observation and practised brushwork. The cast shadow of an object or body across the picture plane may reinforce technique and create a greater depth of naturalism but it also allows shadow to take part in the narrative.

The once popular subject of the 'invention of painting' was derived from a poetic tale by Pliny the Elder, who told of a potter's daughter, who saw the profile of her lover on the wall cast by lamplight and traced the outline. The father later filled the profile outline with clay to make a model of the boy's head. This form

³³¹ Bollas. P. 39.

of profile portraiture based on shadow became popular in the 18th Century with the development of cut-out silhouettes.

“The technique was based on the device of letting the shadow fall on a transparent piece of paper and tracing it from the other side.”³³²

In painting one the first uses of shadow as a subject is seen in Masaccio's *Saint Peter's Shadow Healing*³³³ depicting an incident in the Saint's life when his cast shadow healed a cripple. In later 15th and 16th Century portraits often a cast shadow of the head is used to embolden the sitter. Simultaneously a double framing aspect was employed shadowing an area behind the sitter and down, or along, the edges of the canvas creating more interest in the subject.

At the same time the history of Art's drive towards the development of realism evolved a use of shadow and detail that enhanced the picture surface and drew the eye away from the main subject to provide an echo of the meaning or counterpoise to the story.³³⁴ By the early 17th Century Caravaggio not only displayed the full realist representation of shadow effects but also, as in *The Supper At Emmaus* of 1601, he utilises shadow as a structure, depicting directional influence in the composition, to enhance the theological dimension of the painting, and to strengthen the dramatic impact of the scene.

Shadow can be seen as the half light, the greyness, the non real, the “shape without form, shade without colour, paralysed force, gesture without motion”³³⁵ of the unsubstantial and non colour. It can also operate as that interstitial area of safety, culturally as in the green shade of gardens beloved by desert travellers, or theologically as “in the shadow of his hand he hid me”(Isa. 49:2) it is the security gap where we may rest between actions - “between the idea and the reality/Between the motion and the act/Falls the Shadow.”³³⁶

Conversely shadow can be unsure, the unknown, the unthought nightmare, the “fear in a handful of dust.”³³⁷ Again a gap and here unsettling and insecure but

³³² Gombrich. E. *Shadows*. National Gallery, London. 1995. P. 31.

³³³ Masaccio; *Saint Peter's Shadow Healing*, Fresco. 1425. Brancacci Chapel, Florence.

³³⁴ See Antonello da Messina, *Christ Blessing*, Oil on Wood, 38.7 x 29.8 cms. 1465. and *Portrait of a Woman of the Hofer Family* by an unknown Swabian Artist, Oil on Silver Fir, 53.7 x 40.8 cms. 1470. both in the National Gallery, London.

³³⁵ Eliot. T.S. 'The Hollow Men.' *Selected Poems*. Penguin, London. 1948. P. 75.

³³⁶ Eliot. T.S. 'The Hollow Men.' P. 78.

³³⁷ Eliot. T.S. 'The Burial of The Dead.'

with the option that it is within this situation that remedial action may be taken - “Between the conception and the creation/Between the emotion and the response.”³³⁸ Shadow is also the balance between light and dark; the fluid zone, the intermediary tone, the shady, grey area where things cross over from black to white, or the reverse – “Between the essence and the descent/Falls the shadow.”³³⁹ Shadow is an area of balance but also one of transition, of debate, and of irony. It can be a temporary sanctuary and an emergence taking us somewhere where we are not.

Gustave Courbet, and subsequent artists involved in the analysis of the web of pure colour of which light is composed, began with an examination of the nature, treatment and content of shadow.

“Effects of light and shadow cannot be achieved without colour; colour is, in fact, the effect itself, it is the light rendered visible by the proximity of shadow.”³⁴⁰

Historically such artists were still within the bounds of Naturalism in painting but the reality was that “they were rejecting the limitations of the natural vision in favour of a transposition which should allow them greater creative freedom.”³⁴¹ A new balance between subject, vision and technique was sought and developed. Painting ceased to be a purely external, visual sensation and came to include the private vision and the experimental new techniques. It was through a “passion for light that the landscape of fantasy”³⁴² was established through the involvement of shadow and later, through the influence of Turner, the quality of light and colour as “his pictures not only represented light, but were symbolic of its nature.”³⁴³

In the 17th Century great artists took up landscape painting as an activity in its own right. Landscape soon came to dominate the canvas as the inclusion of

³³⁸Eliot. 'The Hollow men.'

³³⁹Ibid.

³⁴⁰Imbriani. V. 'Letters on the 5th 'Promontrice' Exhibition.' Art in Theory 1815-1900, Harrison, Wood & Gaiger (Eds). Blackwell, Oxford. 1998. P. 544.

³⁴¹Clark. K. Landscape into Art. Murray, London. 1976. P. 172.

³⁴²Clark. P. 181.

³⁴³Clark. P. 181.

figures quickly came to conform to a “timeless, languid, detached or contemplative”³⁴⁴ format, or disappeared altogether. The case of the observed peasantry in Courbet's work was a re-population of the landscape canvas. Through Courbet's use of shadow the rural labourer ceased to be powerless and picturesque. They ceased being timeless and their presence held a latent threat that reminded the viewer of the distrust and ridicule the rural poor had been held in for so long. In Courbet's *The Stone Breakers*³⁴⁵ the shadows cast by the workmen are too large and too dark for naturalism. Their shadows cover an already shadowed landscape in a form of Realism founded on Socialist principles that would later spark a class antagonism across Europe. The older of the two figures also wears wooden clogs or *Sabots* and clog wearers would later develop *sabotage* – the organised destruction of machine and property by dissatisfied workmen, the grey area of transition and change. ‘Like a slave who longs for the shadow’ (Job 7:2) Courbet's figures could be concealed and empowered within the shadow field unsettling the simple notion of shade.

In Courbet's *The Meeting/Bonjour M. Courbet*³⁴⁶ where “the cast shadow appears to be an important means of expression,”³⁴⁷ the shadow of the artist falls across the road and on to a milestone at the edge, which forms a symbolic boundary marker. The shadow of the artist provides stability and enhancement within the painted surface but also indicates a mark of time and of transition, in that the artist, denoted by his shadow, has reached a threshold between two social orders. Van Gogh took this aspect a stage further in his use of colour, shadow and light which was “very different from the pearly radiance of Turner.”³⁴⁸ He unified the figure in the landscape, binding them to it, rooting them in the colour structure they had become part of, and transforming them into an idealised, spiritual entity whose light and energy reflected back to the new industrial slums, the factories and coal mines of manufacturing towns. Van Gogh's interest in this merge of

³⁴⁴Holt. Y. *British Artists and the Modernist Landscape*. Ashgate, Aldershot. 2003. P. 148.

³⁴⁵Courbet. G. *The Stonebreakers*. 1849/50. Oil on Canvas. 63 X 102ins. Formerly in the Gemaldegalerie Dresden, destroyed during World War II.

³⁴⁶ Courbet. G. ‘*The Meeting/Bonjour M. Courbet*’ 1854, Oil on canvas, 129 x 149. Musee Fabre, Montpellier.

³⁴⁷ Stoichita. V. *A Short History of The Shadow*. Reaktion Books, London. 1997. P. 234.

³⁴⁸Clark. P. 198.

genres was not merely a result of the brighter palette he used in the South of France. This hybrid can be seen in the Brabant paintings; *The Potato Eaters*³⁴⁹ is a scene where the figures, their home, clothing, food and work are all drawn together and shown as interdependent. While this may reveal the trapped nature of their existence “his dream was of art with the power to alleviate misery – bring colour into dulled, mechanical lives.”³⁵⁰

The meanings of 'painting' and 'picture' began to separate. The treatment of shadow in Courbet and the introduction of light and colour to shadow in Van Gogh detract immediately from what was the prime directive of landscape – the horizon. Now “the illusion of distance and space [would be] established by other features in the picture.”³⁵¹ Van Gogh would use the same size and style of brushmark on the landscape as he would employ on the faces of the agricultural workers who peopled them. Portraits became a form of landscape where the faces of the peasants were scorched by the sun that they toiled under daily. Figure studies became dominated by light, colour and technique whereby the figurative resemblance echoed the features of the landscape. They appeared as aspects of the world they inhabited and could no longer be seen as incidents in the landscape or mere passers by. Van Gogh's *Painter on the Road to Tarascon* of 1888³⁵² is a self portrait linking the body to the landscape; fixed to the earth by his shadow which is achieved by his equal treatment of body and space in terms of colour, stroke and brush size. His Painter/Tarascon is a vision of a figure at one with his environment; in tune with the colour structure of the world. The shadow the artist casts is light and lively, an aspect of him, part of the road, part of the colour structure accompanying the movement of the artist and allowing a cooler device to weight the incident in the composition revealing academic technique as a historical incident. 'The law has but a shadow of the good things to come' (Heb.10:1) and in this aspect too is revealed the nuance of the

³⁴⁹Van Gogh; *The Potato Eaters*. 1885. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

³⁵⁰Spivey. N. *Enduring Creation*. Thames & Hudson, London. 2001. P. 210.

³⁵¹Harrison. C. 'The Effects of Landscape' in Mitchell. W. (Ed). *Landscape and Power*. University of Chicago Press. 2002. P. 220.

³⁵² Van Gogh. V. '*The Artist – Painter on the Road to Tarascon*', 1888, oil on canvas, 48 x 44. Formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Magdeburg; now destroyed.

eschatological that overshadows Van Gogh on his short journey through life and echoes the shade of our own.

In the relationship of the figure to shadow we have a treatment akin to landscape, which van Alphen has defined as 'bodyscape.'³⁵³ Francis Bacon's *Van Gogh Series* of 1957 was based on Van Gogh's *Painter on the Road to Tarascon*. In Bacon's *Study for Portrait of Van Gogh III* the figure is an all grimacing, blue-black shadow that seeps and leaks on to a road that has a surface the colour and texture of raw meat. The 'bodyscape' is of a shadow of death, immanent, transcendent, immobile but fluid. "Not bodily at all, it signifies the emptiness of death"³⁵⁴ on the road of life. While Bacon revisions Van Gogh his work is a reversal of Van Gogh's self-portrait. Van Gogh's self portraits treat the body as landscape. This is achieved by his equal treatment of body and space in terms of colour, stroke and brush size. His *Painter/Tarascon* is a vision of a figure at one with his environment; in tune with the colour structure of the world. The shadow he casts is light and lively, echoing the movement of the painter, implying mood and allowing a cooler colour scheme to ground the incident in the composition. Bacon in his reinterpretation "makes the space which surrounds Van Gogh into a metaphor of the body."³⁵⁵ In Bacon's versions III and VI the road and surrounding countryside have the visceral rawness of decomposing meat, within *Study II*, however, there is less inherent violence but the figure of death is frozen in the act of walking. The shadows 'effect' is a solid part of him on the road and not merely the result of directional sunlight. The Shadow of Death literally stalks the country road. Nor is this a passing phase as the black area in the lower part of the painting supports the permanence of the darkness of the figure and emphasises the immanence inherent in the image.

The figure's deathly appearance is stressed, even endorsed, by the bodily attributes of the landscape, which creates an active role for the shadow. "He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light"(Job 12:22). Here shadow takes the centre stage, not a supporting role. Body becomes

³⁵³ Van Alphen. E. Francis Bacon and The Loss of Self. Reaktion Books, London. 1998. P. 142.

³⁵⁴ Van Alphen. P. 143.

³⁵⁵ Van Alphen. P. 144.

space and shade becomes the focal image. This is not the unexpected blurring of Bacon's other work nor the unpredicted indistinctness, which we associate with his canvases. Shadows have merged and are actively poised between life and death. A landscape of decay is presented with visceral intensity that "discloses a sensibility in thrall to the horror of unredeemed death."³⁵⁶ This is the danger of shadow in action, where the unknown fear surfaces as *deja vu* and, instead of strangeness, is suddenly recognised in the uncontrollable fear; 'hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb' (Rev. 6:16). The power of shadow as a dark force arises in the loss of the rules of light and dark, 'there is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves' (Job 34:22). Where darkness starts to comprehend the light there shadows will thrive and may be seen as death without resurrection: 'he does not call back his words, but will arise against the house of the evildoers, and against the helpers of those who work iniquity' (Isa. 31:2).

³⁵⁶ Julius. A. Transgressions – The Offences of Art. Thames & Hudson, London. 2002. P. 86.

Shadow as Text.

Rembrandt van Rijn: *The Night Watch*.

*The Militia Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq (The Night Watch)*³⁵⁷ is set in the Great Room of the Civic Guard House where the Siegneur of Purmerlandt (Banning Cocq) as Captain invites the Siegneur of Vlaerdingen (Willem van Ruytenburgh) to lead out the company of citizens. This is one of the great demonstrations of the use and mastery of chiaroscuro; the balance of light and shadow, the management of form emerging from darkness which is central to the work of Rembrandt.

The Great Room, on the left of the canvas, disappears into the gloom enhancing the scale of the interior allowing the viewer to consider the unknown numbers of guards, presumably, coming forward. The actual figures filling the fore and mid grounds flow in a horizontal and vertical ripple of stance, position and posture which creates activity, generates urgency, and produces a narrative that is at once imperative and heroically demanding.

The broad grouping is further illusionistically moulded by the light and dark on either side of the two central figures. On the left a female figure, picked out in a chiaroscuro effect, creates a soft lit, feminine glow within a dark group striking martial postures. Counter balancing this on the right is an area of dark that recedes to the last line of men and thereby thrusts the central figures further into the foreground. This is echoed in the counterpoise of dark and light where the dark figure of Banning Cocq is left of centre beside van Ruytenburgh's light, cream coloured clothing. While various pikes, guns and halberds delineate direction and depth, it is the outstretched hand of Banning Cocq and the parallel pike of van Ruytenburgh, in addition to their forward stride in step with each

³⁵⁷ Rembrandt; *The Night Watch*, 1642, oil on canvas, 144 x 172.5 (ins.) Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

other, which indicates the movement of the company out into the streets. The generation of activity adds to the air of resolution seen in the lit faces of the men. A single relationship emerges between two people distinct from the throng who gaze around them. This pair indicate their involvement in a relationship “constructed by light, colour and a diegetic focalisation, between the girl and the 'hero' of the painting.”³⁵⁸ They are the only people whose glances are direct, committed and genuinely expressive. They are involved in the look they give “aware of and bodily participating in the process of looking [that] interacts with the painting”³⁵⁹ through their own engagement in an act that entails looking. The woman sends her look through the crowd; direct, penetrating and demanding and the viewer is situated between perception and voyeurism. The glance is not returned by the lieutenant, who concentrates on his captain's words, but one senses that at any second his eyes could swivel over his shoulder and find hers. Schama describes her merely as “a brilliantly lit little girl” but the relationship it is one both of seeing and not seeing; absence within presence, which is the prime domain of shadow. These are the figures of light that emerge from the primaeval darkness, “male and female he created them”(Gen.1:27). Shadow can be seen as transitional, 'the spirit of God was moving over the waters. And God said let there be light' (Gen.1:2) and in the instant of shadow is the moment of transition and in moments of transition things change. The transition between these two characters is frozen and it is within the shadowy gap created by the artist that another narrative may appear.

Rembrandt's use of light and colour was highly innovative and was employed “in ways which not only didn't occur to his predecessors but contradict all the basic assumptions about the shaping of pictorial depth.”³⁶⁰ Rembrandt moved from the contemporary norm of the illusion of light advancing towards the viewer and darker areas creating the notion of recession, to the daring use of light as an incidental aspect, inventing dramatic back lit scenes, side lit compositions where light delineated form, and the use of the figure apparently lit from within, in

³⁵⁸Bal. M. Reading Rembrandt. CUP, Cambridge. 1991. P. 449.

³⁵⁹Bal. P. 142.

³⁶⁰Schama. S. Rembrandt's Eyes. Allan lane/Penguin, London. 1999. P. 422.

addition to the many chiaroscuro effects and multi directional light qualities he had mastered.

This scene of sight and sound, from the shouts of the volunteers, the clang of arms, barking dogs, and whispered adieus is personalised for us by Banning Cocq's lips being opened, as is his hand, to issue the command to take the company out. Their staunchness is an essential aspect of Rembrandt's dark and light usage which here is not merely a ploy to increase the quality of the illusion of depth. These men are revealed as a company of light drawn together by drumbeat and alarm in the hours of darkness to combat a foe who would use the shadows of night as a cover. The boldness and assuredness of the commanders is reflected in the determination of the men as they prepare to stride out and deal with the menace beyond.

As in the nature of conflicts between light and dark nothing is decorous here; there is no false modesty but an urgent movement from the shadows to the light that is all inclusive incorporating portraiture, tableau, 'history', vision and "a personal statement about the transcendent, living quality of painting itself."³⁶¹ It breaks the academic hierarchy of genres perpetually emerging from the shadows to erupt into life and light cancelling the confusions and frustrations of darkness, leaving the anxiety of the half light for the structured quality of light before them that is intimated as the protection of Amsterdam.

Parallel to the symbolism of emergence from the shadow is an allegorical incorporation of the representation of the historical aspect of the scene; the citizen at arms as part of created humanity combating a gathering darkness. The dark to light motif is a part of the present emblem where the company emerge from darkness leading their society towards the light of prosperity.

This is not the static set piece depiction of a group of guild members as in *The Sampling Officials of the Draper's Guild*, 1662; this is a scene of action where light is coming into the world heralded by apparently upright, local heroes. The victory that these musketeers, halberdeers and pikemen bring is the symbolic martial strength of the city guard, many of whom sport helmets and equipment from another, antique age, unifying past and present, not in a mythological way,

³⁶¹Schama. P. 495.

but forming a counterpoint with theology. They are not disguised as heroes of a previous age but something more daring. The implication is that they follow in the footsteps of past warriors who defended the city and are thus enhance Amsterdam's claim to be emerging into the light of a new trading nation rivalling Venice or Carthage.

The final and superlative piece of Rembrandt's shadow play is an echo of the hand of the Captain as he ushers his men forward, almost in invitation. The open palm sets up a shadow on the Lieutenant's tunic whereby thumb and forefinger appear to support an animal motif embroidered on the edge of his jacket. This symbol is the emblem of the town, and by this device Rembrandt denotes that the community is safe in the company's hands. It is the shadows that frame colour in the scene with an emergent dynamism that finds the company caught in the flickering light of the great heroic drama that serves as a microcosm of the city.

The Nightwatch was for Rembrandt part of a sub genre of military group portraits popularised in Holland at that time³⁶² but it "flouted two sets of conventions: the rules of art and the rules of muster."³⁶³ Discipline and order are secondary to the drama and urgency of Rembrandt's scene where the spontaneous vitality of the company is kept in check by the controlled concern of their officers. The dark and light of chaos and order become multi faceted in Rembrandt's hands to celebrate not only the vigour and courage of the citizen soldiers but also the genius of the city in a depiction of ideology unambiguously triumphant and perpetually in motion in a composition that is constantly forming up, drumming itself to action, raising its flags and marching out. Parallel to this within this large shadowed hall Rembrandt maintains an edge of menace between dark and light, the shadowlands of uncertainty. Here is the paralysed force, the gesture without motion of *The Hollow Men*. Instead of the fixed, official portraits of officers and men under an even light this company emerge from the shadows in an adrenaline rush of martial activity bearing antique weapons and Neanderthal notions of

³⁶² See *The Company of Cornelis de Graeff* 1632 by Jacob Backer, *The Company of Cornelis Bicker* 1638 by Joachim von Sandrart, and *The Company of Allart Cloeck* 1632 by Thomas de Keyser all in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

³⁶³ Schama. P. 487.

rights and property. Rembrandt can simultaneously depict the irony of a group of landowners and merchants parading as military men and paying for their dramatic representation. The shadows catch them between the idea and reality, bind them between emotion and response, hold them between the dreams of their urban existence and the mercantile desire to avoid “that final meeting in the twilight kingdom.”³⁶⁴

Shadow does not constitute the object though it may echo it. It is only an indication of form as long as the direction of the source of light is recognised. If this is the case a comprehension of the motif and depiction falls into place. If it is not, then the shadow assumes form and also presentation. Absence creates presence in this instance, and assumptions of stability and confidence are questioned. In the absence of other clues we cannot detect recession or progression, nor can we isolate the shadow from its surroundings, nor penetrate its colour structure. The schema of shadow, its underlying principle and unifying experience is light dependant and the eye presupposes relationship to the three dimensional form without ever considering the ambiguities of this sub-dimension of shadow where its darkness may be a solid form or an opening into the void. There is a denial of recognition, no *Gestalt* reasoning in the darkness of the half light and the loss of logic removes assumptions, introduces concern and heralds panic.

Shadow is an area of absence and presence too often negated as 'shade'. Shadow is the initial intermediary of the unthought; the first movement, as a mental action, towards the complexities of our internal world. It is here that we will process our contemplative life. The shadow is the realm of question; a reality within ourselves just as coloured and vibrant as the external one we share. Shadow is not a balance but contains a balance echoed from our general reality of existence and may hold unwanted and/or treasured aspects of our identity. It is only through our use and experience of the shadow area that our meditations may allow us an examination and reflection on the unthought aspects of our lives.

³⁶⁴Eliot. *The Hollow Men*.

Shadow can act as the boundary situation on the edge of darkness. Seen, yet unknown, it reveals the area of darkness and conceals the rim of the abyss. It is an area of temptation and terrifying resolution; a flexible gesture of the light. Shadow offers a choice but impartiality has been compromised by desire – like a slave who longs for the shadow (Job 7:2) and the individual is now subject to Kierkegaard's notion of *Angst* or dread. Shadow can be an area of dread as its very state of being is an annulment of what was. Its loss of purity makes it an easy transition into darkness and sin. “Dread is the implicitness of sin within innocence, the expectation of an expectation.”³⁶⁵ Dread is a stain on the virtuous and stain is the shadow that can spread and fog the innocent in a disoriented state that retains their guiltiness and locks them in dread.

The prologue to temptation is desire, the wish to enter the shadow state. In questioning our state of being, in desiring change or alteration, we question the nature of our being and approach a shadowland of enhancement; improvement on the natural, God given image. This appears more provocative than the disobedience of Eve, or the semantic manipulations of the Serpent's questioning prior to the plucking of the fruit. In involvement in genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery and surgical shape changing the individual reveals a dread of their appearance, argues for enhancement and enters that peripheral darkness where *Word* becomes clouded, disputed and suspect - “this is the true temptation, to regard the Word as interpretable”³⁶⁶ to sense the Word as comprehensible, knowable and thus capable of manipulation.

In the shadow of temptation there is no dynamic, no argument. The damage has already been done before any comment can be made. Any reply, even an aggressive denial, only confirms the stance within the shadow, reveals the stain of temptation.

“Innocence is the capacity to learn nothing.”³⁶⁷ It is faith that can conquer doubt and faith will allow us movement in and out of the shadow of doubt to probe and question, reinforce and resolve our being. Innocence has the capacity, as a

³⁶⁵Harpham. G. The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism. University of Chicago Press. 1987. P.48.

³⁶⁶Harpham. P. 48.

³⁶⁷Harpham. P. 49.

negative aspect, an incapacity to doubt at all, but few can exist for long in the static condition of the *Now* that is the antithesis of the dynamic exchange of language that provides information and promotes ideas. In the shadow we cast no shadow; we have no past or personality – we are as shadows. Temptation can be a discovery of what we are, or what we are not. It is a movement to more subtle forms of language, more clouded areas of expression that can make discoveries in the fog. We enter shadow areas because we have past, characteristics and personal history. Our entrance reveals desires and dreams already held, and, in the process of the act of movement, of gratification. Shadow barely conceals our visible compromise yet our position within it bears a strong relation to those outside it gazing in “tempted both to what we already are and to what we cannot be.”³⁶⁸

“There is in each of us a fundamental split between what we think we know and what we know but may never be able to think.”³⁶⁹ The discovery of shadow as substance may facilitate a transfer of our deepest contemplations into the 'now' of our thought – 'keep me as an apple of the eye; hide me under the shadow of your wings' (Ps.17:8).

If the divine light which through its purity and strength causes darkness and unknowing to the soul and, in the Platonic image, is a light which is also a darkness, then it can be appreciated that, preceding that dazzling darkness of the cloud of unknowing, is a fore- shadow of the unthought. The imagery of divine darkness, the Dark Night of the Soul, or here as divine shadow, the Cloud of Unknowing, is employed to describe the physicality of the journey taken and the interiority of the soul's transcending from dark to light, denial to affirmation, and in transcending distinctions “passing beyond all language into oneness with God.”³⁷⁰ Shadow as part of the visible creation can be an aspect of the invisible nature of God where interior and exterior merge and within which we can enter a nowhere which is an everywhere. It is at once a medium and a reality; a sign of

³⁶⁸Harpham. P. 50.

³⁶⁹Bollas. P. 282.

³⁷⁰Turner. P. 253.

the transcendent within which the rhythm of deliverance pulses. It is in this atmosphere referred to variously as cloud, mist, darkness or ignorance that defines the border that may be crossed and a route taken beyond knowledge and concept, where, 'in the shadow of his hand' we find the unity of God, wrapped in darkness, has brightness before him (Ps.18:11-12).

If it is possible to establish a relationship and understanding with the vaguer parts of our knowledge and mysterious unavailability of much of our learning then within our own areas of shadow we may find the origins of our true self and the key to the troubled dialect that may enable us to contemplate the knowledge that we possess but cannot articulate enhancing rather than suppressing the sense of identification between the self and God.

Chapter Seven.

Light is Sublime.

The term 'sublime' derives from the Latin *sublimis* which links *sub* meaning 'up to' with *limen* meaning 'lintel'; giving that which is set up or raised aloft. Of its many applications it is often used of high moral, aesthetic, intellectual or spiritual value; something noble and exalted. In terms of the divine it is acknowledged that, "such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high I cannot attain it" (Ps. 139:6) which significantly establishes the notion that God's majesty may be conveyed through our failure to articulate it. "Sublime objects create particular problems for the sensations – by presenting themselves as too powerful or too vast or too obscure or too much of a deprivation for the senses to process them comfortably."³⁷¹ The sublime exists then on the margins of reason and expression yet somehow connotes what may lie beyond those limits. It can refer to that moment of apprehension when the ability to express thought or sensation is quashed and in the instant of that defeat the mind senses that which lies beyond expression. "We react with dread and awe to what is sublime because of its appearing greater than we are, for being 'more', and making us acknowledge its power"³⁷² but what of those who overcome dread and become fixated on awe; desire to be 'more' and express its power?

The notion of the Sublime in art has its roots in the 18th Century philosophy of art that sought an aesthetic of nature that went further than the concept of beauty and that was entrenched in taste and form whereas the Sublime was concerned with feeling and formlessness.

The Kantian ideal of nature stimulating the ideal of the Sublime is located in the sense of chaos and disorder of mountain scenery or in the power of waterfalls or volcanoes that is linked to uncontrollable violence and destruction. Whatever the

³⁷¹Ferguson. F. Solitude and the Sublime. Routledge, London. 1992. P. 8.

³⁷²Ferguson. P. 9.

image invoked it definitively exhibited an irrepressible power which overshadowed mankind's strengths into insignificance. Engendering this feeling of helplessness could only be achieved through mimetic representations of the tumbled blocks and jagged peaks of the Alps or of the might and force of a mountain waterfall. Painting was not Sublime but could represent 'sublime' things.

The movement in Modern Art towards Abstraction was not located in the transcendence of materials nor in the artist's vision but in the reality of the transcendental experience.

While there was never a 'school' of Abstract Expressionist painters and arguments ranged continually throughout the loose affiliation of artists about what Abstract Expressionism definitively was, there were some factors held in common. They were all fiercely independent following their own route away from the European tradition, breaking from the formality of the studio/easel painting, and cutting their own trails into interiority. Passion dominated the group also, even to the point of madness and self destruction. In exhibiting their interior thoughts they produced paintings of yet unseen totalities and revealed themselves to public scrutiny. In their large abstract canvases they offered themselves, their 'souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice,³⁷³ and sacrifice, by its nature is a costly business. Their work contained cathedral-like space uniting the sacred and the profane, eternity and the constant now, the work of men and the dreams of the spirit. In embodying these qualities they altered the nature of painting.

“Such an embodiment could only be a transfiguring embodiment, now life and death are truly indistinguishable, for death in being truly embodied, thereby ceases to be alone, ceases to be a sheer nothingness, but becomes instead an embodied nothingness.”³⁷⁴

What has occasionally been achieved by various artists in history, and uniquely by the Desert Fathers, is a new theological articulation through the medium of

³⁷³Scottish Liturgy 1970.

³⁷⁴Altizer. T. Van Gogh's Eyes. Unpublished Paper. P. 3.

light. The desert ascetics were doing theology with their bodies, reminding us that there are other ways of doing theology and that these alternative ways are directly related to the beginning of Genesis and the Prologue of John's Gospel where the word is made light. Creatively and incarnationally light is the initial, unique and momentous theological event. It is the initial *kenotic* event poured out for eternity, at once a sign of salvation and of apocalypse in its revelation and continued concealment. Only through art, and specifically painting which is apocalyptic by definition, exhibiting the sight that mystifies us yet concealing its nature and construction, can we approach a re-evaluation of our being.

What the followers of Anthony and the abstract painters essentially shared was an examination of the nature and function of light. Both their utilisations of light have a theological function, not revealing God but, by their natures, through us, we may see their actions theologically revealing and hiding, creating and deconstructing the divine presence. The Desert Fathers came to an enactment of theology in their lives in the physical context of where they were and through their interiority. This lies parallel to the Abstract Expressionists who in their place and within their total detachment came to an enactment with their materials that redefined our understanding, took us to the margins of our being, and offered a space where theology could take place; that personal, private space between the viewer and the viewed. Neither group was ecclesial nor were they greatly interested in ethics. Both groups were concerned about changing the nature of perception; to reveal light as a dimension, a perspective on our own physicality, and as a deconstructive device for examining our soul, in the case of the Desert Fathers, and the notions of depth and flatness in the work of the painters which fed into the stream of apocalyptic theology concerned with absence and presence, revelation and concealment.

What the painters within the Abstract Expressionist movement achieved was the dis-illusion, the evaporation of the concept of the aesthetic of beauty. If there was to be a structured aesthetic it would have to be of sublimity. There are a great

many qualities alongside beauty that form a framework for aesthetics but none of them challenge the status of beauty in the way sublimity does. The polarity that emerged from New York was seen in terms of a new American way, as opposed to the old European way, but, in the background, there was a degree of political manoeuvring. Greenberg's essay 'Avant Garde and Kitsch'³⁷⁵ illustrated a struggle between incompatible philosophies where Fascism was seen as Kitsch and Socialism as Avant Garde. It was Barnett Newman who drew attention to the history of Western Art³⁷⁶ reminding all that the Greeks had set beauty as an ideal and this had become central to European Art and aesthetic philosophies. Any desire to express a relationship with the absolute came up against the notions of absolute perfection and was branded as fetishism. The history of art, he thought, had been a conflict between ideas of beauty and a desire for the sublime. Indicating the future, Newman saw that the force of Modern Art would obliterate the notion of beauty; where there was still form there would evolve formlessness. The unity of interiority and emotional reaction to the problems of Abstract Expressionism could only be met in the now of existence. The logic of abstraction of this nature found its truth in an aesthetic of the sublime. For both them and the Desert Fathers communication was through the elements that composed the scene; speech was contained within them, thought is expressed in the reality confronted. The dark light of knowledge prepared them for something that was to come and yet had already come; apparently invisible but light is the invisible, the transcendent, the utterly beyond and far side of creation's fabric. It grants the possibility to humanity to re-create and stretch that fabric.

With the rise of Abstraction and innovation of Newman's *Onement I* there existed no intrinsic notion of beauty; what was achieved was something grander and more exalted where, in front of this canvas, the viewer was aware of the sense of their own scale in relation to the painting, their own insignificance in front of the power exuded by the canvas. This was more related to Heidegger's

³⁷⁵Greenberg, C. 'Avant Garde and Kitsch.' Partisan Review. New York, VI, No.5. Autumn 1939.

³⁷⁶Newman, B. 'The Sublime is Now.' Tiger's Eye. New York, Vol.1, No.6. December 1948.

notion of *Dasien* where the viewer's state of being was directly influenced by the relationship established with the work exhibited.

Interiority and solitude are an integral concern of the sublime, not because of the nature of the retreat from society, but because solitude “comes to seem the inevitable psychological reflexiveness that creates individuation.”³⁷⁷ This is not merely a means of escapism, it is a necessary mechanism whereby the communication of the sublime may occur “as a respite from the din of excessive purposiveness that occurs with the beautiful.”³⁷⁸ It was this removal to another place of solitude that fired the Romantic sublime notion of the 'wanderer in the landscape'. This generated an incredible number of travel books, sepulchral verse, Gothic novels and depictions of stern and wild landscapes all of which could be seen as an aspect of melancholia or a temporary trend in the taste of society.

A fascination grew in the transient and fugitive effects of light in wild places. The technicoloured impact of Brocken Spectres, coronae and fog bows, lightening and St. Elmo's fire all verged on the margins of the intangible yet visible. This attraction was fostered partly by the notion of the Sublime and partly by the international interest in the Rococo style which dominated art and architecture in the 18th Century. “The Rococo aesthetic cherished immateriality, evanescence and fragility, qualities supplied in abundance by the filmy effects of light.”³⁷⁹

The Romantic interest in the wildness of creation encouraged many to venture into the mountains of Europe in a search for the Sublime experience as “nowhere but in the mountains do you become so aware of the incorrigible plurality of light, of its ability to alter its texture rapidly and completely.”³⁸⁰

This would have been seen as an intimation of transcendence by the German Romantics but in the Post-modern period would be viewed as a confirmation of immanence. This is central to Post-modern philosophy which abandons authenticity and expressionism, and its rejection of systematic philosophies. The

³⁷⁷Ferguson. P. 32.

³⁷⁸Ferguson. P. 82.

³⁷⁹Macfarlane. R. Mountains of the Mind. Granta, London. 2004. P. 211.

³⁸⁰Macfarlane. P. 213.

Post-modern sublime may still retain a Romantic quality over the infinite and unlimited but had stressed art's or reason's inability to produce definitive terms. What Post-modern art strove to achieve was the representation of the unrepresentable as totally other; the denial of the comfort of structured form and illusionistic space. It was the work of abstract painters that led the deconstruction process whereby a new language would be formed that could allow an increased range of perception.

The movement from picture to painting was the transition from the view of people frozen in actions that we recognise are not occurring in the space we occupy; we see through into their space but are apart from it whereas the painting was opaque. The Sublime transcends beauty and is available surrounded by the painting. Here the viewer stands in a form of relationship with it rather than with an illusory relationship with what it represents. The picture represents something other in its own right. The picture allowed an osmotic relationship; it mediated between the viewer and the viewed whereas a painting is an object related to without mediation.

Where painting and viewer co-exist in the same reality the danger may arise of painting being seen merely as pigment spread across a surface. What painting has, "or we might say it embodies"³⁸¹ is meaning that goes beyond painting about painting. The Sublime becomes apparent when painting deals with something that can be discussed but cannot be depicted in pictorial terms. The Sublime aspect of Abstract painting lies in its ability to enable the presentation of content without pictorial limits. There is no idolatry in abstraction but the possibility of an iconography that can be invested with a spiritual reality. "Sublimity became available to visual artists only when they stopped making pictures and started making paintings."³⁸²

Such art would be initially abstract in style and ultimately formless in composition making it possible to view only by making it impossible to 'see' in structured terms. This would affect not only painting but also what painting was,

³⁸¹Danto. A. Unnatural Wonders. Farrer, Strauss, Giroux. New York. 2005. P. 191.

³⁸²Danto. P. 192.

where and how it was to be viewed, its historical and institutional contexts. Derrida introduced the notion of the *parergon*, the idea of a frame, whether a physical frame around the canvas, the frame of history or of culture or an institution, or the frame of a title; they all relate back to the *ergon*, to the interior of the painting, and nothing is peripheral in the Post-modern abstract work as “a beautiful object has clear outlines and distinct form, whereas the sublime is found in the formless.”³⁸³ Derrida concluded that, on that basis, it seemed there was no *parergon* for the sublime, however this created a 'seem'ing possibility that the sublime could be bounded, that perhaps it was a matter of dimension or scale. This re-awoke the Kantian argument for the priority of reason over imagination; that the sublime emerged only at a certain point where the eye could apprehend all the relevant features. Derrida later summarised this aspect by noting that since the sublime could not be restricted in a finite, natural or artificial object it had to be sought in that which had no limit or boundary. In that respect it is our inability to comprehend the notion of infinity or the sublime that constitutes the true sublime. It can be seen then that in attempting in abstract terms to render formlessness the power of imagination and the restrictions of reason reverse their roles and the *ergon* becomes *parergon*. The sublime allows us to delimit the constraints of reason and let it flow alongside our imaginations. The etymology of *sub/limen* suggests a perimeter but the reference is to the placing of the limit, and its margin is part of a threshold beyond which can be assumed the existence of the unlimited. It is the sublime that warns us of the failure of our imagination and at the same time reveals how our thoughts are framed and limited by our reason. The *parergon* which frames and binds our systems is central to both the concept of the sublime and its deconstruction. In rendering the sublime possible and impossible at the same time it becomes that which cannot be thought of within the terms of the sublime; the lintel, the frame of the doorway is removed, and a threshold is then revealed to our imagination.

Lyotard also rejected the notion of the sublime being related to the finite, objective world: “the 'presence' of the absolute is the utter contrary of

³⁸³Shaw. P. The Sublime. Routledge, London. 2006. P. 117.

presentation. The sign it makes escapes semiotics as it does phenomenology.”³⁸⁴ For him the sublime was not an enigma that could be resolved but a mystery that defied reason. “To be moved by the 'presence' to the senses of a 'thing' that the senses cannot present in the shape of forms is a mystery inadmissible in good logic.”³⁸⁵ Logically any art that attempted to represent or 'be' sublime was certain to fail, but that was the central aspect of abstract art, to locate that which was missing, to delineate the unnameable. What was striven for was that ecstatic moment of sublimity where the viewer felt “first decentered and dispossessed of themselves, and then reconstituted virtually as the author of the work.”³⁸⁶

Much of Lyotard's writings on the sublime centre on the work and theories of Barnett Newman and in particular the series of works that became focussed on the 'Zips' whose contrast to the large blocks of colour left, in a sense, 'nothing' to see, yet mesmerised the viewer. For Lyotard the core issue of the sublime was the essential notion that it alluded to something which could not be revealed or presented. What differentiated Newman's paintings from other artist's works who had stretched the imaginations of society was a threefold structure whereby the work was a self contained unit; it held no reference or gesture towards art history or any external theme. Secondly, there was no hidden depth in the canvases, no illusion of structured space, and finally, there was no complex meaning to be interpreted or comprehended; the subject matter of the painting was itself. In what way could such an object display or be described as sublime?

The impact of Newman's work was partly based on scale where the sheer size of the canvas dominated the gallery space and the viewer. The experience this created was usually deemed to be uncomfortable as their domination defied language, it posed a threat to the intellect which suggested a cessation of life, the end of being with no promise of recreation. This was not a pleasurable sensation as pleasure depends on the suspension of threat, or extinction, and somewhere the notion of restitution. This was participation, not meditation, and to enter the

³⁸⁴Lyotard, J-F. Postmodern Fables. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 2003. P. 29.

³⁸⁵Lyotard. P. 240.

³⁸⁶Harpham, G.G. The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism. University of Chicago Press, 1987. P. 197.

void of these paintings is to deny the comfort of depiction and illusion and wander in a desert where nothing relates to the life you have known. “Newman's lightning flash leaves us with a profound sense of its fragility, of a sense of being teetering on the edge of nothingness.”³⁸⁷

It was this precise sense of the void, of the gap between the viewer and the viewed as being a threshold separating something from nothing that, according to Lyotard, induced a feeling of the sublime as the sublime was never about what we see or the fact that we see it, but about how we see it.

³⁸⁷Shaw. P. 122.

The Sublime is Now.

The pursuit of the sublime in painting was seen as “reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions.”³⁸⁸This was an aspiration found throughout Abstract Expressionism where the viewer was placed “before a void as terrifying, if exhilarating, as the Arctic emptiness of the tundra.”³⁸⁹This was achieved by the fundamental shift in pictorial order creating a new, internal perspective which, in turn, induced a fundamental shift in the role of the viewer. Newman, in his 'Zip' paintings, redefined the constituent dimensions of painting. The acceptance of height and width was re-established in the power of the vertical where the horizon was reduced to the edge of the canvas. This moved the painting to an absolute area of ground that was illuminated by the 'zip'. “The dismantlement of the pictorial syntax then also caused the painting on the wall itself to resemble a wall, to become impenetrable”³⁹⁰and only interpretable by the initial light of the vertical, ragged stripe of the 'zip' which revealed the unknown space, concealed its own source, and was not overcome by the 'darkness' around it.

Newman confronted the viewer with an event that could not be defined, that resisted attempts to impose rules or categories. In his 'Zip' paintings there is that perception of an instant in which something occurs, without warning, to which we are forced to respond. This neither confirmed the familiar nor denied the transcendental but rather forced the viewer to participate in the emergence, and emergency, of the 'Now'.

Structurally the 'Zip' operates as a Derridean *parergon*, a frame or border dividing form from chaos but Newman's inclusion of this 'edge' within the painted surface, as opposed to the norm of the surround, captures the action of the eternal 'Now', that second of movement, that instant of action that is infinite

³⁸⁸Newman. B. 'The Sublime is Now.' 1948.

³⁸⁹Anfam. D. 'Transatlantic Anxieties, Especially Bill's Folly.' in Abstract Expressionism-The International Context Marter. J. (Ed) Rutgers University Press, New Jersey & London. 2007. P. 61.

³⁹⁰Boehm. G. 'A New Beginning' in Abstract Expressionism- The International Context. P. 103.

and sublime. The taped lines, over-painted along one edge, create a dramatic energised line in the removal of the tape and produce the act or event between huge blocks of colour. This is not the movement from chaos to order but that instant of the flash of initial light that sets the whole creative process in motion, and in the image depicted there is that which allows the viewer a glimpse of the procession of events flooding out across time, which has just started.

In his article of 1948 entitled 'The Sublime is Now' Newman articulated; “we are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationships to the absolute emotions.” It was this concern for absolute emotions that drove the abstract movement away from a consensus of taste to the point where reason is short-circuited and led to that area where experience, knowledge and understanding fail to provide resolution. The Sublime demands that we acknowledge the absurdity of attempting to fathom the gulf between the theoretical and the practical, and Lyotard argues it does so “by retaining the idea of the sublime as an indeterminate 'event',”³⁹¹ an event that is immaterial. The paintings were material objects but they allowed the 'event' to take place by suspending mental powers of pure or practical reason. This was a disruptive event that forced critical thought to crisis point and left the spectator on that threshold of the unknown, which was the great value of the sublime in that it was entirely resistant to rational appropriation.

Standing in front of Newman's work was to be in an unknown situation, in a hostile environment, with no references to previous situations and perceptions. To remain in such a state demanded a new thought process, a new way of being, and this was the journey of the Desert Fathers.

This can be seen as a reflection of the theology of Genesis where the initial light is in process, the immediacy of absolute creation is made visible and the viewer is compelled to contemplate the vertical motion of the sublime instant and is caught in the mobilisation of the colour's forceful energy displacing the background. “The renunciation of a simultaneous overview causes a crisis in our

³⁹¹Shaw. P. 123.

relationship with the painting”³⁹²as the viewer can no longer engage in a meditative speculation of a canvas that cannot be fathomed at a glance. The once visible order has been removed and the viewer is confronted with a new perspective in an analogy of the force of darkness being dissipated by the divine light of creation. The sublime power of beginning is seen in *Onement*³⁹³ in the direct impact of the canvas alluding to the power of light at that moment of divine *kenosis* which, at once, displays and transcends itself. “The moment of the sublime can never be fathomed, that is, deprived of its power.”³⁹⁴ The viewer is uplifted, directed to look upwards; to stand erect and hold themselves upright. What is removed from Newman's work is the sense of anxiety prevalent in much of the work of Pollock and de Kooning. Everything in Newman's 'zips' is doubtless and positive, like pure light.

Abstract Expressionism despite its individualism and disunity did resolve itself “into a greater and more direct vitalist unity or holism than any works seen before in Modern Art”³⁹⁵through the process of interiority. The reintegrated wholeness, or totality, of these works is analogous to the absolute wholeness of divine light configuring existence after the turmoil and cataclysms of the abyss. The canvases are not entirely metaphoric, they are also metonymic. Metonymy is that purposeful link of image to meaning in analogy where the interpretation of an image depends on an explanation existing outside the painting itself. Abstract Expressionism incorporated flatness, innovative handling of materials, all over composition, and radical abstraction. These all brought to bear on each other producing a meaning that the canvas might not have had if an element had been omitted. This was comparable to the absolute purpose of light linking the new light/image to the multiplicity of meanings suddenly available in the instant of creation.

³⁹²Boehm. P. 104.

³⁹³Newman. B. *Onement I*. 1948. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

³⁹⁴Boehm. P. 104.

³⁹⁵Polcari. S. 'Pollock and America, Too.' in Abstract Expressionism-The International Context. P. 190.

In structuring this these painters changed the nature of the gap between the viewer and the viewed. These works envisioned a new totality where subject and object were indistinguishable, where subject ceased to be an individual and interior subject and released a wholeness and completeness whereby the viewer was included into painting, invited to explore the depths of hidden sanctuaries and lost transepts of embodied formlessness. As chaos was the formlessness which preceded the divine act of creation so formlessness was seen as the primal building block to structure this new art. As the light of God allowed the formation of creation to become visible, permitted the structure of the luminaries to be achieved and the fundamental factors in the destiny of humanity to become illuminated, so light became the material of construction within these paintings and the over-riding factor in understanding this form of expression. This was the deepest expression of creation; the restructuring of elements into the sublime was achieved through the deconstruction and reforming of the painting process. Matter and form proceed from the creative power and conform to the creative purpose. Good was never meant to denote a state of unlimited perfection: good and evil, light and darkness, the sublime could hold all things in the second of the now, in the ecstatic moment. In this transfiguration the spectator was drawn into the arena of creativity where the coloured forms could be seen as the glory of God but a glory that was eternally linked to the chaos of formlessness. A glory of colour and light grounded in the weave of canvas echoing our being as creatures grounded in creation. This was at once a new, pure iconography and an erasing iconoclasm inseparable and indistinguishable from one another. It is the power of this fully visual *coincidentia oppositorum* that attracts and repels, that comforts and disturbs the viewer. Light becomes similar to absolute darkness, the sacred floods into areas of the profane, and we are confronted by an anamnesis that Christianity historically triumphed by effecting a direct negation of status and power, by offering a channel to the opposite of what was available, a passage into the interior, to the dark light. Abstract Expressionism allowed painters to fully envision the darkness of the Godhead by erasing the concept of perspective that had started with the body. When faces appeared that truly and

uniquely reflected the individual a face appeared that was face alone. Face as a new and original perspective dominated consciousness with a new vision centred on the eyes that could propel an interior ground; manifest vision and power, clarity and direction. The mathematics of perspectival distance lent an air of intellectualisation to what had been regarded as an artisan craft and formed a deep iconographic tradition that was available for all to visually appreciate but that lacked insight into our relationship with the Godhead. Abstract Expressionism incorporated the iconoclasm of broken perspectives and an iconography of space and formlessness transfiguring the absolute mathematics of perspective into an absolute formlessness of light and space enhancing the notion that only in the darkness of chaos is the brightest light found. It is only through the acceptance and embodiment of the darkness of formless chaos that an total darkness could be realised, and if, in the realisations of these paintings a formlessness is called forth, a formlessness which is finally the formlessness of God, it is a full envisionment and a celebration of the most profound and ultimate darkness of God.

It was Newman, and other abstract painters that placed their work and their being before the sublime, that sought to honour the creative process. Like the Desert Fathers in removing themselves from the life around them they created a state of being-before-the sublime.

It is interesting that liturgy can be defined as “the resolute deliberate gesture made by those who ordain their being-in-the- world a being-before-God and who do violence to the former in the name of the latter.”³⁹⁶ While the artists of the New York school of Abstract Expressionism may not have required institutional religion as part of their lives their drive towards a purer form of creative activity and an expression of the sublime reveals again a core value shared by the Desert Fathers where both groups deconstructed their pasts, violently and irrevocably, to formulate a new way of being before the sublime.

³⁹⁶Lacoste, J-Y. Experience and the Absolute. Fordham University Press, New York. 2004. P. 39.

Towards Formlessness.

Flatness in modern art can be seen as a progress of natural development away from the notion of depiction, towards an individualised, self-referential status whereby paintings appeared as complete, original works in themselves, with flatness, as with depthlessness, coming to stand as a metaphor for the post-modern denial of the culture they developed from. Depthlessness became equated with shallowness and Greenberg's notion of shallow field depth was drawn into an arena of superficiality in a literal sense where this was the central formal feature that was deconstructed by post-modernism. This area of flatness became characterised by pastiche and simulation and gave rise to a form of hyper-reality in global society, where what was offered as real was not enhancement or even refinement but a form of fictional reality that had never existed. This was the area that Pop Art operated in. The images that Warhol produced simulated existence rather than actually existing; they had no existential reality or depth in their enactment of being. Flatness could be manufactured in hyper-reality into an acceptable and commercially viable item. Flatness became depthlessness became image and the superficiality of likeness, the flatness image, is the price culture pays when representation or reflection are all important in life, where thinness dominates fashion, 'look' controls business, and the image becomes more important than the reality.

The flatness of modernist abstract painting was not just an optical event. The flatness evolved marked a change in perception that went beyond the transformative. By abandoning the mimetic the viewer lost a degree of identity with the picture. With the additional displacement of illusionistic space such canvases offered a very private experience to the viewer but such viewers as could interpret this experience were fewer and further between.

Abstract painting, working within the flattened fields of depth, moved from the conscious experience to the unconscious. These works relayed a set of artistic

responses to the viewer who adopted them to suit their own responses. The issue of flatness as an optical aspect was, at this point, received as a psychological 'feature' where the visual object's identity was deflated by the culturally conditioned qualities of the viewer traditionally supported by perspective. The 'loss' of depth held a potential disaster in terms of spectator reaction. Greenberg had been acutely aware that the effect of the new abstract expressionist works of Pollock, that he had championed, could be seen and criticised in a variety of ways from decorative effects bereft of representation, to undisciplined, emotional outpourings so individual as to offer little to the lives of others. Greenberg's optical analysis of depth and flatness, and his differentiation of the means of achievement were at the crux of this dilemma. Underwriting the notions of tautness, tension and scale was an insistence on psychological depth that set up parallels with flatness, regarded as density or the weight of feeling. This division of illusionistic depth into emotional and optical stances meant that "the expression of psychological depth requires the sublimation of optical depth."³⁹⁷

This resulted in the clash of vocabularies associated with aesthetics and the self, overshadowed by the influence of cultural institutions and the difficulties of articulation. The relationship between the viewer and the viewed was now asked to consider abstraction as a psychic formation to be related to, or alienated from, but alienation could be seen as close to liberation. The thread of abstraction taken from Kandinsky and woven into the fabric of Surrealist imaginations was re-embroidered in the New York School but this thread can only be untangled by the point of the historic link between them, not by a single analysis of one of Pollock's paintings.

Modernism promoted the notion of the anonymity of the artist and enhanced the aspects of impersonality in the artist; the retreat from the commercial to the aesthetic tower and its superiority to the worldly mundane. The compulsion to deny security and comfort for the sake of, and as a sacrifice to, new creative work, the doubts and torments - all echo the temptations of the desert ascetics whose lives and work depicted the dynamics of creative self denial. The desert

³⁹⁷Joselit. P. 295.

could be seen to embody all that was malevolent in humanity; to enter the desert was to enter the self. “A man did not escape to the desert to find identity but to lose it....In a sense he made himself the void, becoming in the process an embodiment of silence.”³⁹⁸

Pollock's canvases force the frontier of intelligibility and at the same time resonate with the initial structures of order from the void. Illusionistic depth as a three dimensional impression generated from the early Renaissance onwards loses its impetus when the interiority of the canvas matches that of the artist. What ensues is an art of surfaces, of flatness, a place of recognising everything that is denied or substituted by normal society - “only there could the wind of the spirit begin to blow.”³⁹⁹

It can be accepted that even in the apparently flattest of modern painting neither the perception of depth nor its expectation could be excluded. What evolved within the shallow areas of the surface of these paintings was a cypher of depth, a spatial displacement that left a trace, a signifier of depth. There also arose an “important allegorical dimension of depth in Abstract Expressionism”⁴⁰⁰ where painting emerged from an inner source, a psychological depth was apparent. It could be argued therefore that, in Pollock's case, what was expressed were feelings rather than illustrations of them. The new techniques became a means of expressing the statements felt between emotion and abstraction. The psychological depth furnished the tautness of feeling in much of Pollock's later work. The depth is flattened due to the tension of the skeins of paint lashed and fastened across the canvas. There is no slack in his lines, no bulges or protuberances; no coiled recession or re-entered contour. Everything produced from now on was determined and “inspired by this need to enter into a more thoughtful relationship with the world,”⁴⁰¹ which was at the core of the Desert Fathers retreat following Christ who had shown how to negate death by

³⁹⁸Cowan. J. Journey to the Inner Mountain. Hodder & Stoughton, London. 2002. P. 26.

³⁹⁹Cowan. P. 27.

⁴⁰⁰Joselit. P. 294.

⁴⁰¹Cowan. P. 62.

welcoming it, and how to turn life and death into an entirely inward illumination mysteriously experienced by the heart.

What occurred in addition to the movement from depth to flatness, and psychological depth, was a transference of attitudes about flatness as opposed to the illusion of the mechanics of the individual artwork. 'Surface' became an issue, specifically with Jasper Johns in his *Skin Series*⁴⁰² in the early 1960's. Johns' project equated the skin with the surface and pursued Pollock's notion of the self as a painterly form; the expression of the self in and on the picture plane. What emerged from this was the enhancement of the notion of a metaphor of imprisonment generated by Pollock, Reinhardt and Louis. This development was the movement away from the disciplined gestural painting of Pollock and de Kooning to the intensely repressive incarceration of Johns' sense of the physical limits of creativity. "I am concerned with a thing's not being what it was, with its becoming something other than what it is, with any moment in which one identifies a thing precisely and with the slipping away of that moment."⁴⁰³ This was the movement from flatness to surface. The painted surface holds the skin surface, seemingly welling up in an attempt to break through surface and establish self. Pollock's flatness held the organised beat of repetition. Johns' surface holds the tension of panic and denial and ultimately of sacrifice "and a spiritual essence [that] could only be achieved through "oneness."⁴⁰⁴ The work of Jasper Johns in this area justified itself within those categories and at the same time provoked misjudgement as "whatever was irresolute and ambiguous he made deliberate."⁴⁰⁵ Part of this impact was Johns' sequential but disarranged approach which resisted any form of continuous reading and conditioned the viewer to concentrate on the immediacy of the image presented.

⁴⁰²Johns. J. *Study For "Skin I"* 1962, Charcoal on Draughting Paper, 22 x 34 ins. VAGA, New York.

⁴⁰³Johns in conversation with Brookes. E. in 'Master of Few Words'. Guardian (G2) 26-07-04.

⁴⁰⁴Cowan. P. 153.

⁴⁰⁵Kozloff. P. 206.

The formlessness of the field allowed many to make a mere inventory of the marks and see nothing, to miss the experience. It was argued that Johns' work was neutral at best, passive in its methodologies but where that psychological environment is flattened and muted the formless logic operates a series of intense resistances to coherent pictorial structure and fluid symbolism. What edges Johns' motifs towards the formless "is his persistent disclaimer that they are what they are."⁴⁰⁶ His disorientations and dislocations produce a multi faceted refraction where the point of focus is never fixed, contradicting the viewer's knowledge with what the viewer sees. An implosion of painting aspects, language, colour optics and illusionistic movement creates the dissociation which now becomes the inherent condition for viewing. This is not an abstract denudation of visual information nor the concealment of the illusion of depth, the formlessness striven for is not held in some relationship or sum of the parts of painting activity, but in the nature of the activity itself. The parts are exchangeable and hold no pretence, rather what is elicited is the doubt as to the identity of the images he creates, not as equation or riddle but as a form of parabolic poetry.

What is incurred is the gradual cessation of the perceptual process until it senses the immobility of the formless, the eternal unalterable 'thereness' of visual art that impresses its presence on us and not the shock of its being. The ingredients of the formless can be tabulated but this is neither usable nor descriptive of the hypnotic quality they exude. That too is formless, a mirage, a hallucination, but it sustains rather than diminishes the power and presence of this notion of formlessness.

The enigma of depth is the fusion of perspective and the space we see between and beyond things. We see things in their own place as they eclipse each other, rivalling each other for our sight. The fusion of their exteriority and their mutual dependence gives us depth as we contour existence. Whether the fusion is a dialectical one of essence and appearance, a Freudian form of latent and manifest, Foucault's programmatic and symptomatic, or the existential version of authenticity and inauthenticity which finds an ally in the post-modern opposites

⁴⁰⁶Kozloff. P. 207.

of alienation and disalienation, or the semiotic diagonals of signifier and signified, ultimately is not an issue as depth is replaced by surface, or the intertextuality of multiple surfaces. Depth deconstructs itself into the components of flatness as under modernism the flatness of the canvas remained fundamental to the criticism and definition of painting. "Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to that art."⁴⁰⁷

The movement to formlessness brought flatness to its current situation. Form/less came out of a deprecating format that implied that everything should have form. The notion of formlessness was sense/less as it designated nothing, held no shape, did not resemble nameable parts, yet the notion of the universe as a formless mass was similarly seen as denigration, how could the created order as nothing named or measured?

⁴⁰⁷Greenberg, C. 'Modernist Painting,' in Harrison, C. & Wood, P.(Eds) Art in Theory, 1900-2000. Blackwell, Oxford. 2003 . P. 775.

Chapter Eight.

Light is Dis/illusion.

A creative act can be seen as an act of violence, an act of change, destroying the silence of an empty canvas. The primed, primal surface serenely white and pregnant with possibilities is slashed and stained as the process starts. The Creation from a primal blackness, the eruption of light, and with that, the devastation of colour and contour, texture and form, revealing the contorted mass that served as chaos until the chaos of colour arrived. “Light was at once substance and medium. All things reflected their source, the light that is God and God's emanation.”⁴⁰⁸ Darkness, now shrunken, receded into the void of oblivion and light, as a force, comes into effect making the dying spasm visible – the Spirit's oscillation generating movement on the surface and a slow upheaval in the interior. Light “spreads around us as an illusion of vacancy”⁴⁰⁹ where the absolute whiteness is as blinding and disorientating as the blackness. The light formulates and presents an “absent horizon, lifted away from the ground. The ground and sky now uncertain”⁴¹⁰ in an intensity of emptiness. A space defined by light which has become “the modality for knowing and experiencing God, with light as the source and form of God's presence.”⁴¹¹ What the artists previously discussed had in common was a determined independence, a single-minded purpose that, through their interiority, achieved a self-abandonment that can be aligned to the fierce mysticism of the desert fathers; both groups being drawn to the light of an infinite horizon, being pulled on an individual quest for light prompted by their own inner darkness of an unknown God. It was St. Paul, in the middle of the Areopagus, that advised that God was not in the shrines made by

⁴⁰⁸Dillenberger. J. *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities*. SCM, London. 1986. P. 40.

⁴⁰⁹Thubron. C. *In Siberia*. Chatto & Windus, London. 1999. P. 113.

⁴¹⁰Darrieussecq. M. *White*. Faber & Faber, London. 2005. P. 48.

⁴¹¹Dillenberger. P. 40.

men, nor was God physically served by humanity but what he had created was done so that 'they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him. Yet he is not far from each one of us' (Acts 17:27).

At roughly the same time it was recorded that 'every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the father of lights, for with him there is no wavering or shadow of turning' (James 1:17).

The creative gift that comes from above, from the father of lights, is reputedly wisdom; a divine, gracious wisdom held deep inside us unlike the earthly, superficial wisdom that drives selfish ambition. A light that knows no shadow equates with the initial divine outpouring of creation and so James' text, at this point, may be seen to resonate with Genesis 1 whereby 'in your light may we see light.'

James' "connection between divine wisdom and a light free from any 'shadow of turning' appears to be rooted in a tradition preserved in Philo."⁴¹² This attitude to the perfect light, shadowless and unwavering, is echoed in Rev. 21:23 where New Jerusalem has no need of sunlight 'for the glory of God is its light'. The initial, incarnational light will be re-revealed in the fulfilment of the Alpha and Omega motif where 'its lamp is the Lamb'. The constancy and unwavering nature of the divine light will draw all to it 'and there shall be no night there' (Rev 21:25).

This contrasts with the notion of Logos in John's Prologue where the word is a constant – 'all things were made through him' (Jn. 1:3) and incarnational word/light – 'the true light' – is the light of men eternally shining 'in darkness and the darkness has not overcome it' (Jn. 1:5). Similarly in Eph.5:8-13 we 'walk as children of light' but must be on guard against 'the unfruitful works of darkness'. "This is an environment that contains the seeds of separation"⁴¹³ whereby the darkness may recolonise creation, recreate chaos because of humanity's negligence and ignorance, accepting only luminary light and forgetting the divine light of the *kenosis* of creation. It is the Epistle of Peter (1 Pet. 2:9-10) that

⁴¹²Poirier. J. 'Symbols of Wisdom in James 1:17'. Journal Of Theological Studies Vol. 57, Part 1. April 2006. P. 59.

⁴¹³Jasper. A. The Shining Garment of the Text. Sheffield Academic Press, 1998. P. 223.

appears to bridge these contrasting viewpoints. We are 'a chosen race' and are called from our state into the 'marvellous light.' Humanity is the great parergon; we frame the light as the light frames us. It is in our nature to deconstruct, re-evaluate, reframe what is about us and move on to some ultimate omega state into the permanence of the inherently non-interrupted, ongoing 'marvellous light.'

There has been in the Post Modern movement not only a resolve to deconstruct paintings but also, as part of this process, a determination to explore the dominant question of meaning in painting. The examination of the canvas for overt or covert messages, values that are enhanced, causes and stances that are denigrated, is an approach that has been emphasised of late by art historians. Parallel to this has always been the question of whose interests are being served by specific paintings. Traditionally this view of art history – seeing the canvas as an aspect of ideological control indicates, by its definition, the power source as an external facet to the image. This tends to ignore an internal proposition that the image itself may dominate the imagination and generate variations on the theme and influence others with its solution to the problem posed.⁴¹⁴

The treatment of light in Western Art suggests that this may be just such a case. While light as a metaphor and symbol has overt Christian significance the rendition of light in painting has never been seen in terms of 'any graven image'; the depiction of light on canvas does not generate a golden calf. Many paintings from the Fifteenth Century onwards were commissioned by the Church and contained obvious scriptural narratives but the imagery produced of light, technically and symbolically, has influenced a unique series of artists down to the present day. This influence is not limited to the history of figurative painting – the rendition of light in abstract terms was a major concern of painters in New York in the 1950's. Post-modern philosophies have extended this notion of the containing influence of imagery where they may indicate to the viewer the terms of their own reality or where a mediated image may come to function as reality instead of representation.

⁴¹⁴For example see Steinberg's Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper, Zone Books, New York, 2001.

The truth in painting is a textual statement about painting implying that, definitively, the power of painting relates to the notion of restored truth revealed without interruption or disguise. This representation of truth can be seen as a faithful representation but does not manifest truth. It is the presentation of a re-presentation “which not only opens above the gulf but also holds together the opposite edges of it.”⁴¹⁵ If the truth, as pictorial representation, contains the tension of opposition of meaning as content and form, then a series of tensions will further exist if art is to distinguish an inner meaning through a series of oppositions related to its production - “interest always relates us to the existence of an object”⁴¹⁶ and if subjective satisfaction determines aesthetic judgement it must, and can only be, centred on disinterest.

This notion of Derrida's that artwork is 'framed' and characterised by its apartness, that it can inhabit an area of being excluded from 'extrinsic' concerns allows light to be defined as a typical parergon; that is, light is an exclusive phenomenon, a unique experience set apart and delineated, yet by its nature impossible to delineate. For Derrida this is a semiosis - a process that cannot be limited within the logic of enclosure. For him there was a frame – but the frame did not exist.

The desert functioned in much the same way for Anthony and his followers; it was a phenomenon apart. The desert was seen as the opposite of the civilisation the monks wished to quit but it also embodied all that was malevolent in humanity whereby to enter it was to invade the self. No one entered the desert to find an identity but to lose it, to erode personality, to be part of the void, to become an embodiment of silence. Centuries later the abstract painters of New York, who wanted nothing to do with religion, also enacted the Derridean notion of delineating that, which by its nature, was impossible to delineate.

As Jesus went out into the wilderness to pray and be tested by the devil so Anthony and the Desert Fathers went deeper and longer into the desert to test themselves through internal and external forces that, in that place, had control

⁴¹⁵Derrida. J. The Truth in Painting. University of Chicago Press. 1987. P. 6.

⁴¹⁶Derrida. P. 44.

and a greater command of the environment than man. The daily life in the wilderness provided a frugal and remote existence that permitted the *askesis* – the ascetic training whereby they could approach the divine.

In a similar way the New York abstract artists of the 1950's and 60's developed the austerity of the studio - “by which we perceive the unperceivable; by which we know the unknowable.”⁴¹⁷ Here they concentrated their efforts to approach the totally abstract. This was Derrida's notion of 'the desert in the desert', of pushing beyond the frontier to a place outside reason and rationality to a situation beyond convention and order where the unknowable could become known, where one could enter the true light.

As it was the landscape and climate which formed and defined Anthony's spirituality and being, so in New York the desert within the desert of the city loosed the abstraction and nature of the artists' developments. Where the desert had identified a process of disengagement from the world by emphasising a clear ecological frontier now the studio became the cell in which the abstract painters fought and wrestled with the problems of abstraction, the methodology of a purity of line and colour, and the mechanics of non figurative painting where “the world is won by those who let it go.”⁴¹⁸ This was no safe haven. The demons of doubt and loneliness, the temptations of the commercial world, and the need to communicate and circulate ideas, were locked inside the studio with them. The studio became a place to be most feared, the place where modern demons were most powerfully encountered. As Anthony went into the desert's isolation and emerged full of life and vigour so too does the work of Pollock and de Kooning, of Reinhardt and Rothko, emerge from this period as new, idiosyncratic, and pure in its abstraction. In Anthony's writings, especially in the *Epistles of Anthony*⁴¹⁹ there is an emphasis on gaining knowledge “which is above all a knowledge of the self, whereby we are saved and thus returned to God.”⁴²⁰ This too is seen located in the works of the Abstract Expressionists. The refinement of

⁴¹⁷Reinhardt. A. *Art as Art*. (Rose. B. Ed.) University of California, Berkeley. 1991. P. 90.

⁴¹⁸Reinhardt. P. 93.

⁴¹⁹While the emphasis on knowledge may appear gnostic these texts are almost certainly genuine although the original Coptic text has been lost.

⁴²⁰Jasper. D. *The Sacred Desert*. Blackwell, Oxford. 2004. P. 27.

form and depth, the technical accomplishments, the solutions to the problems of scale and abstraction, are aspects seen by Anthony as “intellectual participation” through which we may participate in God and may gain knowledge of the divine by the same process of concentration, subjugation of exterior interests and passions, and a denial of physical and mental hardship. By this *askesis* the mind is trained and cleansed. “The order sought in the desert is a reconfiguration of the disorder of the fallen world of the cities.”⁴²¹ This process of understanding their inner selves resonates with the studio art produced by individuals, not a school of thought, that entered into self and there found a freedom from the restless and dislocated narratives of illusionistic figurative painting. They have left the hagiography of painting and entered the *quies magna* of abstraction. The huge silence of Rothko and Newman's works dominates the rooms they are exhibited in and is a reflection of “the utter desert where each monk remains in his cell.....there is a huge silence and a great quiet here.”⁴²²

As David Jasper has argued, there is, in the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, a sense that the entire task of describing the trials and privations that the ascetics went through, and the spirituality that they achieved, is beyond the abilities of the writers. Similarly in encounters with abstract painting the viewer enters an experience that is immediately outside the limits of visual language and concept. The search for space and light in painting could never be a collective issue but, like the ascetic monks, was “a radical decentering of the self in a perpetual wandering”⁴²³ within the self and the materials engaged with where light became space and space light in a culture that attempted a perspective of the void and back to a new visual structure of dis-perspective. “Pollock seemed to step outside of himself, to begin to address issues of artistic authorship and individual style with an amazing acuity and critical distance.”⁴²⁴ Pollock's own process of self examination, like that of Marc Rothko and Morris Louis, was a journey into the interior self which provided a wholly new and immediate world but in that process the interior could be destabilised and had the potential to badly damage

⁴²¹Jasper. P. 28.

⁴²²Jasper P. 40, note 45.

⁴²³Jasper. P. 36.

⁴²⁴Kantor. J. 'Signature Styles.' *Artforum*, October 2006.

the individual. With the surrender of the individual interior there was created images of light transcending all individuality, beyond all interiority, towards a total and immediate presence. “Whensoever we make our life and deeds better than they were before, we increase the pleasure which we give to God”⁴²⁵but contact with the wholly other could produce an absolute interiority unbalancing the individual and leaving them exposed, vulnerable and often seriously weakened.

Post-modernism has encouraged a re-evaluation of modernity's notions of originality, authenticity and the male domination of society. Art and Theology have both been awakened to the historical and institutional modes of reception and the need to broaden the methodologies that produce meaning, away from preconceived universal standards.

The criteria of aesthetics have been severely challenged in their relationship between form and meaning. This area, once crucial to aesthetic judgement, has been dissolved. In this deconstructive argument a void has been opened in the process regarding the effect that recent developments in contemporary art, and new work in art theory, are having on the formation of aesthetic categories and judgements. While modernism in painting dealt with medium specific issues its methodologies opened up a previously uncharted area, which provoked, expanded and realigned areas of expertise along which the movement was organised.

What the creation of light initiated was the security of a basic freedom to see, perceive and contemplate what was in front of us, and projecting this freedom into European culture, to make up our own minds on matters of expression, aesthetic or otherwise. This demarcated an area of choice that was overshadowed by an area of influence and of control. Thus “the history of images is also the history of forbidding the making of images.”⁴²⁶

The complete ban of Exodus 20:4 prohibits any likeness of any thing and may lead the artist to a pictorial metaphysics, but visualising God as an icon is

⁴²⁵St. Athanasius. The Life of Anthony. (Trans.) Budge. E. Kessinger, Whitefish Montana. P. 26.

⁴²⁶Danto. A. Unnatural Wonders. Farrar, Straus, Giroux. New York. 2005. P. 102.

idolatry – the worship of finite things, which is what Exodus was intended to forestall. The light made flesh allowed the worship of the infinite made finite; “He is the word existing beyond time, both source and final purpose,” the “light from light” that is the “light shining forth from the light....sent into the world by Him who is the Father of Lights.”⁴²⁷ This is light “of one substance with the Father”⁴²⁸ which is deemed “not of a like substance, but of one and the same substance.”⁴²⁹

There is also the notion that the creation of the initial divine light was universal, and mysteriously *lowered* to the level of human sight as if God not only illuminated creation but also mingled his glory with the soil and debris of chaos, merging eternity with the dust to achieve salvation through an enfleshment of his creation under his light that endured under the luminaries, “sealing the promise of a new creation, given, yet still to come.”⁴³⁰ In entering that light we are drawn into that creation where, in the ecological balance of what we term nature, we sense a greater harmony and compassion than that of humanity; beneath the ashes of our ecological disasters and distress we may discover the capacity to unveil the meaning of that initial light that “lives in us that we may walk in light.”⁴³¹

It is this sense of being under the light, in being within a relationship that Newman implies in his large abstract paintings. The 'Zip' paintings generated a focus that refracted a variety of associations: the window, the door ajar, the strip of light, an opening tearing the surface apart suggesting an interior space. Newman was adamant that they were not abstractions, nor depictions of a pure idea, as they contained no depictive allusions but had to be *experienced*. These, he advised, were to be confronted close up where one was acutely conscious of a connection, like someone standing next to a waterfall who becomes sensitive to updraught and moisture, force and pressure, our association with the image leads

⁴²⁷Daniel. E. The Prayer Book; Its History, Language and Contents. Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., Redhill, Surrey. 1948. P. 352.

⁴²⁸Scottish Liturgy. General Synod of the SEC. Edinburgh, 1982.

⁴²⁹Daniel. P. 352.

⁴³⁰Scottish Liturgy, Eucharistic Prayer II.

⁴³¹Scottish Liturgy, Eucharistic Prayer IV.

through similar sensitivities to a self-awareness as a being in a relationship with the divine.

Newman's work has achieved an iconic status and icons were never considered to be mere pictures, nor were they purely decorative as “icons are fraught with magic”⁴³² where the identity of light may be defined as residing in the gap between itself and the repertoire of images in play. While his use of black may express tragedy it also denotes space, the chaos from which creation comes, and the inter image dialogue of the series deals essentially with that instant of movement from dark to light.

It may be that in the desert light resides the highest truth, boundless and indefinite as God but that could be “at the cost of endless wandering and the loss of any intimate human engagement.”⁴³³ The lives of the Desert Fathers complies with the notion the Heidegger forwarded as measuring oneself against the godhead which imagery could have been sourced by Holderlin who ventured that “man/ not unhappily measures himself/ against the godhead. Is God unknown?/ Is he manifest like the sky? I'd sooner/ believe the latter. It's the measure of man.”⁴³⁴

If God is manifest in the “luminous background against which we see whatever we see”⁴³⁵ then Holderlin's measure must relate to the way in which the godhead remains hidden, and is revealed to us, as such, by the light, being the medium by which we see everything that appears, which in turn acts to disclose that which conceals itself. We may see the light not by seeking to explore what is concealed in its hidden nature but only by accepting what is concealed within its self concealment. If this is the state against which man measures himself then it is an apocalyptic measurement; an absolute measurement. This is to live in an awareness of the godhead within the light; to measure up against the totally other and the possibility of presence and of existence of things that are therein, where light wars with darkness, where we fight ignorances to see the truth.

⁴³²Danto. P. 253.

⁴³³Edwards. J. The Plain Sense of Things. Pennsylvania State University Press. 1997. P. 109.

⁴³⁴Holderlin – quoted by Edwards. P. 177.

⁴³⁵Edwards. P. 184.

The history of, and debate on, modern painting, maps the progress of visual art's ability to remain didactic outside the formal representational formats of the early 20th century. Clement Greenberg first theorised on the development of non-representational, abstract painting “as the emphasis on an engagement with the flat surface of the painting's canvas over its traditional task of mimesis.”⁴³⁶ The movement away from depiction to an examination of the medium and its relation to the canvas introduced the notion of flatness as a concept in modern painting. The post-modern notion of surface has entered an area of concern linking aesthetics with the socio-political but surface requires a deeper appreciation and comprehension, as flatness and surface are examples of an inter-relationship between content and form where they merge as tributaries in the modern/post-modern stream. “The ethical riddle which haunts a complex and contradictory field of discourses on flatness and depth within art history”⁴³⁷ parallels the texts of apophatic theology where the oppositional notions of light in darkness, dark light, and clouds of unknowing all revolved around the problem of formlessness. Apophatic theology moves beyond recognised linguistic formats and conceptual accounts to utilise the antithetical pairings that allow us to picture a form of formlessness. While imagination may be difficult to articulate it remains part of our experience and the formlessness we experience in the globalised world is a resonance we recognise in the light of the Godhead.

The mystical tradition and post-modernism share similar questioning attitudes as regards the nature and function of light relevant to us and our attempts to deal with it. Light is veracity and truth but this can be learned and cultured. A re-visioning from both groups was developed but its purity was of an extreme category. Both the Desert fathers and the Abstract Expressionists were essentially short term manifestations whose legacy could be seen as a warning as to what might befall the individual rather than offering encouragement for more to follow them. Learning from them became the task of others, integrating their works and

⁴³⁶Kocur, Z. & Leung, S. Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985. Blackwell, Oxford. 2006. P. 280.

⁴³⁷Joselit, D. 'Notes on Surface – Towards a Genealogy of Flatness.' In Kocur & Leung – P. 293.

making their principles accessible to ordinary people. Much of what St. Anthony had striven for was achieved by St. Benedict where his 'Rule' simplified and formalised much of monastic life, and in a similar way St. Francis' notion of Tertiaries allowed the working people around Assisi to claim a spiritual capacity within their secular lives.

The movement from an art based on interiority to one located in the self as constituted through the interplay of surfaces is the movement to a psychological flatness. The danger in shifting from the optical to the psychological is apparent in the use of language employed where deconstruction and the post-modernist theory unify areas previously clearly defined as different. This is seen where the articulations of identity are characterised by an erosion of the differentiation of terms and suddenly the language of political theory can approach the idiom of art criticism. Art about art has become prevalent in the post-modern period “signalling the narcissistic bankruptcy of art”⁴³⁸ according to some who see art as offering no new insights but reproducing old art which ironically destroys what importance it once had.

The vision of Western Christian culture is the death of death; the negation of the negative and thus eternal life. The repair of the void; the bridge over the abyss, not so much the exit as the way out – out of the desert of life and into the heavenly kingdom. The movement from perspective to depth to surface and flatness has been approached as that road. Formlessness takes us to the notion of timelessness and the luminous darkness of the divine. It is however only an approach, a movement towards, from the desert of existence, and the desert is the source of mirages and illusions “and no mirage is more powerful than the mirage of a way out, no illusion harder to overcome than the illusion that the desert can be escaped.”⁴³⁹ Modernism in painting has consistently led us deeper into the desert. Refusing the illusions of perspective, denying the mirage of depth, it has concentrated on surface and flatness, the basic ground of our being and

⁴³⁸Kuspit. D. The End of Art. CUP. 2004. P. 54.

⁴³⁹Taylor. M. Disfiguring. University of Chicago. 1992. P. 280.

relationship with the cosmos. Formlessness is the very sand of the desert, constantly moving, eradicating direction and flow, eroding sign and significance. Formlessness does not close the void, it widens it. It does not offer a way out, or healing or wholeness, but it can broaden our insight and teach us to wait quietly within the desert.

The generative base for all light is darkness. The notion of a dark light that is built on and is without beginning or end, and all light proceeding from it, is one of the great holy mysteries. With light what we attempt to resolve are the unique characteristics of the medium; what we attempt to control is a damage limitation exercise; what we avoid is the notion of infinity, the alpha and omega of light from and of the Godhead.

Our senses allow us the perception of light but they also limit the amount of light we can perceive. Light is infinite and blinding and we can only cope with small amounts. The sheer volume of light, its intensity and power has to be contained within the narrow protective band of our senses. Our problem, physically and theologically, has not been our reception of light but that of light management and from that there has been a general tendency, reinforced by time and tradition, that we should avoid the bright light, that there is an inherent danger in light which we would do well to avoid. The contemporary experience of light is minimal; our experience of light has accrued an apocalyptic bias. Light does not support the mind, it 'plays tricks', it defamiliarises and dislocates our senses. In the extremes of desert and polar light there are false margins created whereby physical advance is countered by a further sensation of recession as light there removes all notion of form and contour. The eye cannot locate reassuring forms and plot a course; the mind cannot operate its 'gestalt' reasoning and formulate a notion of distance, and becomes disorientated in the formlessness of light beyond our capacity to limit or reduce, to contain or reason.

Confronted by the void of light, echoing the dark void of primeval chaos, we may realise that the void is us, a vast reflective disc within us revealing our lostness. This is the antithesis of the urban distractive space which offers a

degree of security by diluting the self. In this polar or desert light the mind is unbound, unleashed, inside becomes out and the concentration is on self, who we are, and the key questions of our existence in the now of light. The danger lies in attempting to reason this as hallucination, to quell the notion of being caught in someone else's dream, to escape from the dark light within us as it is reflected by the pure light as by an ultimate mirror. This is not emission theory, in this strength of light the eye does not afford such expenditure nor can it receive such capacity as this is beyond the level of information storage. There is no retrieval process, no system for encoding or decoding light. It is here at this point that we must release our cultural fear of mirage and unleash our imagination to seek an intrinsic sense of purpose, the teleological harmony of light and a sense of its ultimate purpose.

The secret of light, and darkness, is its nothingness, its groundlessness, its lack of rationality. We have constructed a rationale within the limits we can tolerate and what is beyond the margins of our tolerance we deem as mirage, as hallucination, and deny. We operate positively within a sense of absence and “absence is the very heart of the question”⁴⁴⁰ as light both attracts and alienates us. For painters light has often been the alpha and omega, both the source and final destination of their work. The painter must assume the creative aspect of the divine and thereby lose himself in the light if they are to see light and thereby render light. The paintings evolve only in the absence and in solitude, and develop into a resource that can indicate to the viewer that direction to proceed in to come into the light. Paintings are wordless intricacies and facilitate that retreat into the deepest interiority that has never been lost but which we have been encouraged to ignore and concentrate on the stuff and structure, the tone and brushwork of the canvas in front of us. Reason and society provoke what they need, not what the individual may require and it may be that there is a need for an unknown, uncharted theology of light to be articulated; a visual theology that will radiate silence from beginning to end.

⁴⁴⁰Jasper. P. 161.

Ultimately to interpret is to impoverish, to reduce, deplete, diminish the light in order to produce a shadowland of 'meanings'. The refusal to leave light alone may be an aspect of our freewill but it also attests to our capacity for nervousness and fear that generates the need to tame and deconstruct. Interpretation attempts to make light conform, make it definable and manageable.

Parallel to this is the fact that light consistently drives us to analyse and question the values of self which we cherish. Changes are achieved, sacrifices are made, but rarely made clear and can appear as negative, motiveless options where interpretation becomes demolition.

Light, like Art, is enlivened by language: they demand responses and urge humanity to create a form of 'lighterature' and, whether written or not, to provoke discussion between the mind and itself. It is only through writing about light that humanity can realise how untouchable it is, how unrecoverable if lost, and since we reflect or observe our own feelings we realise we must alter our reactions to light in order to externalise them.

Humanity has, in common, that ability to see the 'otherness' of light, its distinctness as a phenomenon separate from their own schemes, systems and ideologies. This is reflected in their ability to deal or perceive the problems set by modern art, and reveals a crucial deficiency in Western society.

The movement into modernism denied the spectator entertainment and involvement by merely viewing the work in front of them. Modern painting strove to remove itself from immediate interpretation, and abstraction allowed the dismissal of perspective, depth and content without which any interpretation had to be considered, knowledgeable and conversant with the nature of the art discussed. Later, Pop Art, which appeared as a reaction to, and was the apparent opposite of, abstraction, worked to the same end whereby the content of painting was so blatant and obvious it too became uninterpretable.

The work of those painters noted who have dealt with light draws the infinite out of the finite; orders the visible sign of the mystery of divine presence. Light brings its own depth, its space, its truth "to our conscious awareness as an unforgettable experience of presence."⁴⁴¹ Light is at once the simplest and most

⁴⁴¹Greene. R. Searching for Presence. Rodopi, Amsterdam. 2004. P. 98.

ineffable presence, visible yet concealed behind the veil of its definitions. It is light that provokes the sense of oneness, wholeness and identity that we seek intuitively in our disjointed lives. Light happens to us naturally and this occurrence defies easy definition as it is an encounter between self and something independently, totally other.

What the artists discussed have attempted is the rendition of presence. A presence that is ineffable but located in the materials of the canvases mentioned and that can “offer us the possibility of direct, immediate access to otherness.”⁴⁴² Modern art removed the limits of beauty and ugliness and moved on to blur the categories of good and bad, of indifference and commitment. It anaesthetised into insignificance the interpretive notions of 'exciting' and 'mediocre' for a mass audience. Analytical observation and description was demanded of the individual and not all were prepared to tackle the challenge; to accept the provocation of the mind in dialogue with itself. In many ways the public, wishing to understand modern painting, were being asked to adopt aspects and attitudes displayed by the Desert Fathers; quiet, self-control, humility, patience, discretion and non-judgement. Just as the Desert Fathers had turned their back on normal human activities because they felt that it would be impossible to attain a genuine spiritual understanding in the world so some artists have turned aside and regarded the world as a projection of their inner condition, denied reality and entered the true desert composed of our flaws and faults, the dust devils and mirages of our imaginings where we must withstand the incursions of the real and strive to re-enter the true light; 'for once you were in darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light' (Eph. 5:8).

⁴⁴²Greene. P. 105.

Conclusion.

Light has become a commodity, like time, and has a past and a history. Light is something we trade in, make use of, and produce. Technology has allowed us to turn night into neon lit day, to illuminate cities, control traffic, and alter working patterns, but generated electricity has incurred costs also, not only to the consumer, the environmental impact of power stations, hydro-dams and nuclear plants is still to be calculated. Light is comparable to the exposed film of our lives playing, and occasionally freezing to an absolute zero, the numinous within us. Light is distinction revealed; the revelation of objects as they are undiluted by the dark, undissolved by blackness. Light offers us a system notation for the blank spaces whereby distinctions may be assessed. We can mark the passing of days and seasons by natural light and have the scientific ability to study the sun and everything under it and we take it all in, the beauty and horror are recorded but the grandeur of light is why we remember it. Light is still, relatively, an awesome unknown and can serve as an analogy of God, the overwhelming unknown.

It is light that has created depth and allowed the notion of perspective to be translated from the contours of the crust to the constructs of the canvas. The absolute blackness of the abyss permitted no realisation or image to be held, distance and recession came into being with the first divine light of creation. With the development of perspective in painting came an interpretation of space and with the refinement of Abstraction in art came the new insight; the perspective of the interior, the perspective of eternal light.

It is light that is the analogy between the verbal narratives of Genesis and John's Prologue and the visual substantiations of Morris Louis and the Rothko Chapel. Light is a constantly multi-levelled word but at its core is its constant creation, at its source is the Godhead whose creative freedom resonates with the artist who

can liberate us with the notion of seeing and comfort us with a vision of eternal light.

Artists have allowed us to 'see the light' and through that process have permitted us to engage in life in a different way, to glimpse our part in the organisation within light. By way of a theological reading of some paintings we can sense a new reading of creation where light is the first great theological moment. Art has been exploring and analysing the theology that the Church can no longer do; it is the work of painters that can often offer us a commentary on Scripture. It can be seen that throughout the history of painting there is a locus of theology in the event of light and while styles and tastes changed, and politics and the reformation altered the debate and language of the discourse, they have still allowed us 'to see', to interpret, and undertake a renewed perception of our existence and being.

Light created space and the pursuit of depicted light by artists over the centuries shaped the representation of space, and through perspective, which developed from a three dimensional view of the world based on Euclidean geometry, they rendered the observed reality around them. The quest for illusionistic depth led to perspective but ultimately perspectival space is closed, finite and limited. It was dissembled by Impressionists and deconstructed by the Cubists where horizon became a foreground and surface became a plane. At this point perspective ceased to define course and content; it no longer bound the threads of narrative nor defined the important or superficial. Perspective lost the power of meaning that it had held over space and the events it narrated. The flaw that the Cubists upheld was the notion that depth had to be expressed in genuinely plastic terms. Depth became an entity rather than an illusion and was depicted with as much solidity as the objects themselves. What was not immediately recognised was the fact that depth is never absent from the simplest of any plastic work – multi coloured spots on raw canvas will always appear to be on different planes since “the many wavelengths of light corresponding to different shades of hue are dealt with by a few types of receptors, each sensitive to one colour.”⁴⁴³

⁴⁴³Arnheim. R. Visual Thinking. University of California Press, Berkeley. 1997. P. 30

Ultimately what never changed was the nature of light, and light and colour came to dominate the concerns of abstract painters in a rainbow appreciation, in the same way it had concerned the Desert Fathers who were acutely aware of the covenant made visible (Gen. 9:13), divine light briefly coloured to make it discernible. At the other end of the spectrum the peace of the night-time desert sky lit by stars strewn in profusion throughout space held that dull glow which served as a reminder to the monks of the luminous cloud of the dark knowledge of God which is recalled in the black density of Reinhardt's paintings and the rippling light of Pollock's canvases. The Desert Fathers, like the 'New York School', lived in community yet were highly individual; solitary ascetics/artists bound by shared interests, the search for interiority, and the need to be their work. Where the desert monks were not so much attempting to follow Scripture but actually be Scripture their theology was one of enactment. The physical context of where they were endorsed and aided their ability to live in the light of the Gospel. Again this is comparable to the situation in New York as both groups were immersed in a process of becoming within their physical and created deserts as "to create a desert means learning to be self sufficient, learning to remain undisturbed with one's own thoughts, one's own prayer, one's own destiny."⁴⁴⁴ Both groups "accepted the risk of engaging in a lonely artistic act,"⁴⁴⁵ ceaselessly restarting their existence; striving constantly to maintain the moment of the 'now'.

The Desert Fathers and the Abstract Expressionists encountered a clash of vocabularies while the other artists discussed sought actively to expand the vocabulary of light. The vocabularies still clash; as we attempt to talk of light it deconstructs our argument. In starting to reason light we are left at the end acknowledging that we know nothing really. It is the Epistle of Peter that appears to bridge these contrasting stances. We are called and chosen from our state of

⁴⁴⁴Carretto. C. *In Search of the Beyond*. Darton, Longman & Todd, London. 1983. P. 19.

⁴⁴⁵Boehm. G. 'A New Beginning; Abstraction and the Myth of the 'Zero Hour" in *Abstract Expressionism-The International Context*. Marter. J. (Ed), Rutgers University Press, New Jersey & London. 2007. P. 99.

being into the permanence of the inherently non-interrupted, on going 'marvellous light' of God.

Painting, and sculpture, can in many respects be seen to derive from drawing.

The marks used to draw form out of absence and contour line on the white void of paper design a pattern of light; designate the form of light. That is what we mark out; what is indicated and denoted, signified and named by line and paint “which can fix only visible light, that mere threshold”⁴⁴⁶ when what we strive for is the light we sense within us. What the draughtsman and painter endeavour to seek is that essential line and tone, they quest for “that inner form which comes from an inner light, the light of the mind understanding the world in its transparent immediacy.”⁴⁴⁷

It is our own light that we strive to recover, that dark light at the core of our soul, the misplaced marvel of our youth, the lost light of potential, that initial light of creation, flawless, good and perfect. Light is the life within us and art is the creative fire that instructs us about it, and that outlives it.

⁴⁴⁶Bonnefoy. Y. Giacometti. Flammarion, Paris. 2001. P. 490.

⁴⁴⁷Bonnefoy. P. 490.

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